

Leap of Faith (Catch Me, If You Can)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/54620467) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/54620467>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandoms:	Batman - All Media Types , Spider-Man - All Media Types
Relationships:	Peter Parker & Tony Stark , Ned Leeds/Peter Parker , Dick Grayson & Peter Parker , Peter Parker & Jason Todd , Tim Drake & Peter Parker , Batfamily Members & Peter Parker
Characters:	Peter Parker , Bruce Wayne , Dick Grayson , Jason Todd , Tim Drake , Damian Wayne , Alfred Pennyworth , Barbara Gordon , Stephanie Brown , Duke Thomas , Tony Stark , Natasha Romanov (Marvel) , Spider Sense - Character , Friday (Marvel) , Pepper Potts , Happy Hogan , villain OC , background oc - Character , mentioned Skip Westcott - Character , Loki (Marvel) , Ned Leeds
Additional Tags:	Not Canon Compliant , like sort of but in the "canon is mine now" , DC stands for Disregard Canon , Homeless Peter Parker , Dimensional Travel , Angst and Humor , Found Family , they found him and decided to steal him , Tony Stark Acting as Peter Parker's Parental Figure , Peter has ALL the parental figures , he collects them the way batman collects orphans , Hurt Peter Parker , Peter Parker is a Mess , Peter Parker Has His Shit Together , Protective Peter Parker , BAMF Peter Parker , Peter Parker is a Little Shit , Teen Peter Parker , Peter Parker Gets a Hug , Dick Grayson is Peter Parker's Biological Parent , Peter Parker Calls Tony Stark "Dad" , Peter Parker is Trying His Best , Peter Parker Acts Like a Spider , Peter Parker Needs a Break , Peter Parker Has Panic Attacks , Peter Parker has PTSD , Good Parent Bruce Wayne , Protective Dick Grayson , Romani Dick Grayson , Good Parent Dick Grayson , Protective Batfamily (DCU) , Batfamily Dynamics (DCU) , Batfamily Shenanigans (DCU) , Caring Batfamily (DCU) , Mutual Stalking Shenanigans , Peter Parker is a Foster Kid , BAMF Tony Stark , Tony Stark is a Bad Medical Patient , Past Rape/Non-con , does NOT go into detail but it IS there and please look after yourself , Mentioned Skip Westcott , Fluff and Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Dick Grayson and Richard Parker (Marvel) are the Same Person
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-03-21 Updated: 2024-05-25 Words: 253,799 Chapters: 10/?

Leap of Faith (Catch Me, If You Can)

by [alighterwood](#), [ErinWantsToWrite](#)

Summary

He clicks on Gotham Wikipedia with bated breath. And it doesn't take long for Peter to figure out just how bad the situation is. Gotham isn't just a city, it's apparently a hellhole. What kind of villain playground is this world running? How could anyone let it get this bad? Where is the government? Where are the heroes?

Peter's heart swells at the thought. He needs heroes! They'll be able to help him! For villains, there is always a hero around. He searches for just regular "list of heroes." The first thing that pops up is a website- JusticeLeague.Org.

-

Peter, like any 14 year old superhero, really wants to catch a break. He's just a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, nothing special. Well, only if you don't look at his biology ever since the radioactive spider bite. And his extensive track record of running away and deaths in his life. And that his foster-dad is Tony Stark. And that his mentors are the Avengers. And the fact that he was randomly kidnapped one morning on his way to school and now he's in an alternate universe with a bunch of different superheroes that keep stalking him.

He thinks they mean well, but they're really weird. Besides that Red Hood guy. He's pretty cool.

Notes

just a quick preface before getting started: regular disclaimer of "i don't own marvel or dc" and "obviously i am not perfect so i'm gonna miss a lot of lore and the characters might be a little ooc."

Hi hello hi. I should let you know that a lot of this is fanon, and there's... a lot going on lore wise. i'll try to make it as clear as i can as we go along, so that even if you didn't read peter's past personally, you're still aware of him and his motivations. this is the brain child of alighterwood and i's, and tbh i wasn't sure if i'd ever post it, but here it is. no longer just for us <33

PLEASE READ!!!

There is mention of Skip Westcott in this story. I will NOT be going into detail. He's a part of Peter's past and it will be implied, and there may be a conversation later about it and the impact, but I will NOT be talking about the events or describing *how* it happened, just that it did happen. But no matter what, PLEASE take care of yourself. This will not REALLY come up far later, but there are several mentions to him in Peter's inner monologue. There's

also going to be mentions of foster care- please do not take this story as the tell all for that. Peter had a bad time and Gotham canonically has the Worst Foster Care, but that doesn't mean the foster system in real life is this bad. Again, this will be canon typical talk for DC and Marvel, but please take care of yourself.

With that being said: i hope you enjoy! please leave a comment and don't be afraid to nerd out or be a little crazy and leave an essay if you want. leaving comments really helps or is just super fun to read!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

slipping through my fingers, all the time

Peter thinks he might have died. But he isn't sure.

He remembers looking for Tony, as he fell through endless sky. He reached out with his web-shooter for anything to hold onto, but all he could see was blue and white looking down at him. Like he's small. Like he's insignificant, in the grand scheme of things. Nothing to grab, nothing for safety. And he looked for Tony without thinking about it, shouted for him, because he could hear Tony in his comms. He could hear how the man's voice shook, heard when *he* spotted Peter, but Peter didn't see *him*.

"I see you, kid, just hold on! I'm coming, I'm almost there!"

But Peter couldn't find anything to hold onto.

Strong hands choked Peter's throat, wrapped so tightly that his vision started to swim. He shook Peter around in his fury, screamed in his face. Peter couldn't hear what he was saying, not with the wind howling in his ears, the sea growing closer and closer. Peter could smell the water, the salt in the air, and he *knew*. He knew that Tony might not make it. Not this time.

(And he wondered, for the smallest second, if this is what his parents saw when they died in that plane crash.

Endless blue sky.

Small and insignificant.

He wondered if the wind was too loud, if they held onto each other.)

That's when Peter felt *wrong*. Every nerve pinched in his legs, spreading up his body like a wave of cold water washing over him. He unsuccessfully bit down an agonized cry and opened his eyes, stinging tears blurring his vision. Ashes float in the wind, flying away from him in a dance of sparks. It consumes his view, a thick black snow that sits in his hair and on his skin.

Peter barely managed to make the man let go of his throat, desperately gasping for air. His arms felt weak, *too weak*, and he could hear a shout of horror. Tony is scared, more than Peter is, and it doesn't make sense. Because how bad is it, that Peter feels the pain, but someone else is more scared than he is?

"Tony- I-I don't feel so- I don't feel good." He choked out, his throat burning with the effort, the pressure of hands still wrapped on his skin.

The man grabbing at Peter disappeared in a cloud of black ash, serpent yellow eyes fixed on his, and the ghost of his words echoing in Peter's sight. Peter was left with just the sky, just the sun and the clouds. And Tony. He could see Tony, *finally*, and Peter felt relief. His hand

reaching out towards Peter, a flash of light as the nanotech of his bracelet wrapped around Peter's wrist.

But when Peter reached for him, his hand was crumbling away into nothing but dust. The last he sees of his foster father is the man screaming and his hand grabbing onto the ash of Peter's. The pain is unbearable, his nerves alight like fire over his face.

And then he stopped falling, his back hitting concrete with a sickening crunch.

-

new, different, same?

-

The first sensation he had when he came to was the high pitched ringing in his ears. The second was the pain and nausea.

Peter groaned as he came to (- how long was he...?) and he rolled onto his side, sputtering for air with shaking limbs. His hand slips on crumbling rock, and he catches himself barely in time not to hit the ground again.

The concrete underneath him has splintered outwards from a crater. Which Peter distantly thinks "*Oops,*" for, because that will have to be fixed. Peter crawls his way out of the crater that he doesn't mourn making, because he's focused on a metallic taste in his mouth that he can't get rid of no matter how many times he swallows.

His back burns under that familiar (sometimes, awfully painful) itch of healing. Like fireworks along his back, he can feel the nerves repairing themselves, sewing back together. It's an unpleasant feeling, one that makes his head spin, but it always is that way. He's used to it, unfortunately, but he still has to hold back the bile that threatens to come up.

The earth is spinning underneath him, a double vision split that he can't get a hold on. Peter closes his eyes as he stays on all fours, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. The stinging from his back grows more aggressive as he attempts to gain his bearings.

Angry hands squeezing the air out of him-

Peter coughs, rubbing his own hand on the skin of his throat as if he could clear away the feeling of those fingerprints. The ghosts of them press down on his throat like they're still there. That man had been so *furious* at him, but Peter didn't even know *why*. He hadn't done anything crazy, he didn't even recognize the guy.

It had happened way too fast to make sense.

The man that attacked him just now had approached him on the street, and Peter could tell he was bad news right away. His spider-senses went off like crazy, howling to back away- to run. *Get away get away get away*, it said, but Peter couldn't cause a scene with so many people nearby.

“Just talk to me for a second,” He had said, his eye twitching when Peter took a step back. He just *kept* trying to get Peter to talk to him, no matter what Peter did to get away. Excuses that he has to get to school fell out of his mouth, he tried getting behind the bus stop, he tried weaving through the crowd. Nothing deterred him, the man had kept his eyes set on Peter, kept calling out, *“Come here! I need to talk to you!”*

It was when Peter alerted Tony that something was wrong when the guy got so *mad* at him, that he snapped. He yanked Peter’s arm backwards with more force than Peter expected of him, and then they were-.

Ashes, falling, empty sky-

“Tony-!”

Peter sits up too fast and his stomach protests fiercely. He falls towards his right, thumping into a brick wall. Tony was right there, he was trying to help. Why didn’t Peter use his web shooters to bring him closer? It was just a little pain, he should have sucked it up and pushed through it! He holds onto his head, trying to clear away the ringing- no, static- wait, static?

His fingers reach towards his ear, pulling back a clump of metal. He turns his earpiece over to try and see it better, but the double vision makes it near impossible. All he can tell is that it doesn’t *look* broken, but it’s sparking at the bottom. *Not good.*

This comm was built by Tony to be near indestructible, looking like nothing but an earbud. It connected to his phone, but it was a comm, so Tony and Peter could talk at any time. And now it’s nothing but scrap at the moment. He stuffs the earpiece into his pocket- his normal *jeans* pocket, because everything went to shit at the worst possible time. He can’t even get to school without something going wrong.

Oh, shit, Ned is going to *freak*. They share locations with each other on their phones, no doubt it alerted Ned the second Peter was attacked, just like it does for Tony. If this turns out to be just a weird thing that happened (please) and not a life-alerting event, Ned is going to give him so much shit for how Peter’s luck is so bad he should try to contact Guinness World Records.

That villain- *fury, Peter can’t breathe-* Peter needs to focus. He could still be around somewhere, maybe even waiting to strike Peter. He’s an older man with a wiry frame, but deceptively *strong* grip. It had shaken him to his core to be yanked back so easily by someone, especially someone that looked like an old twig.

Peter tries to commit his face to memory, so that when he sees him again, he knows. His nose was sort of wide and flat against his face, his cheekbones jutted out at a sharp angle, and wispy white hair that looked like he’d been electrocuted. *Serpent yellow eyes, filled with rage-*

Calm down, Peter.

He was making spacial jumps, pulling Peter farther and farther from the Manhattan street when Peter refused to go with him. Teleportation isn’t something Peter has trained against, so

it took too long to gain his bearings during the struggle. It was all he could do to kick and fight to get out of the grip.

It hadn't felt like magic, he thinks. He's met a few magic users and they briefly talked about stuff like that with him, showed off what they could do. No, this guy was something else. He had tech on his arm, that must have been what was causing the jumps.

That man was trying to get Peter away from Stark Tower- which is insane, considering that Peter was *leaving* the area already. He was headed to school, there was no doubt that Peter would have made it further away, and Tony wouldn't have even gotten close. Had this guy just been impatient, or was he stupid, too? Peter struggles to keep track with what happened...

They kept getting higher and higher up, Peter managing to slip out of his grasp a few times, but getting caught again. They had crashed into a building at one point, but then appeared higher up. At one point, it got too high for Peter to just jump down once he was let go, and they ended up above the ocean instead of the city ground.

But he knew- he knew that Tony was coming to save him. So Peter grappled with the man to let him go as they started to fall, straight towards the sea. That's when he wildly grappled to grab at his throat, and the ash started.

Ash... Peter wipes at his mouth and cheek, pulling back to see it. There was nothing there, but he *swore* he had- he had turned to ash. Tony had grabbed dust instead of his hand. And then...

Peter looks at the crater he had made. It was smoking around the edges, and there Peter could smell the fire. He runs a hand along his back and feels nothing out of the ordinary; no rips, cuts, or popped seams. But he *can* feel the bruising of falling from an extraordinary height.

Just... Peter shouldn't worry about that right now. He's moving fine, not even that injured overall. Instead, he should focus on contacting Tony. He reaches into his pocket to pull out his phone, only to find nothing on him. Cursing, Peter recalls dropping it on a roof during the struggle.

"Just great." Peter mutters to himself, his throat screaming in protest. "Perfect."

When the world stops spinning, Peter gets onto his feet. His suit is in his backpack, which had, thankfully, not come off in the struggle. He needs to find a way to contact Tony, and fast. Maybe someone will let him borrow their phone? He has emergency cash on him, maybe a phone booth will be around somewhere that he can use.

Peter takes the time to get on his feet to observe his surroundings. It's a dingy back alley somewhere, the smells hitting him harder than usual. There's a chain-link fence with barbed wire at the top on his left, and past two dumpsters to his right is the open way out of the alley and towards a street. There's not a lot of people, but there are a few walking around.

He chances a glance towards the sky, and his stomach sinks. Why does it look like it's about to rain?

It had just been sunny moments ago, that much he's sure of. How far did he travel, that he's now surrounded by dark clouds? The smell of smog coats the air, and, to Peter's distress, gunpowder. It's all around him, and it might account for the bitter taste in Peter's mouth. Where the hell in New York is he? He doesn't recognize any of the buildings he can see.

Phone. He needs a phone.

He stumbles out into the street, a man dodging him and cursing under his breath before going along his way. He looks around for a sign of anything familiar, but even the architecture is different. The buildings around him are more... Gothic? Is that the term? He doesn't know much about architecture. But each building here is made of dark stone, pointed arches and asymmetrical windows.

It wasn't the architecture that startled Peter the most, but how it's lived in. There's broken glass underneath a shop window, a section of the display cleared out but the rest of it left untouched. Some of the neon signs in the stores flickered every second, some only half lit. Peter doesn't recognize any of the store names: *Slim's Service Station*, *Donahue's Department Store*...

Peter can smell guns everywhere he looks. A father and his daughter passing by have three on them, and Peter can only see one on his hip. There is an older man waiting at a bus stop, leaning on the pole and smoking a cigarette. He has a knife strapped to his thigh, but he's dressed in a business suit and reading the paper like it's a normal Tuesday morning. There's an uncomfortable metallic smell that's *not* gunpowder, but blood. It's nearby, somewhere, but not an amount that is...

Concerning?

It's all concerning. He means "they aren't dead" concerning. He doesn't hear screams or groans of pain, so he's assuming it's old blood.

Worst of all, when Peter looks up at the street sign above him, he doesn't see a glorious number system like he's used to. There's instead just a name: *Graham Street*.

Wait, he's not in Chicago, is he?

"Oh, this is bad." Peter runs a hand over his mouth. He can't be *that* far from home, right? All of those other teleportation jumps had been short, just a couple blocks.

Phone booth, now. Peter can figure out where he is if he can contact Tony. He spots one next to the bus-stop, and he skirts around the man with the knife to get to it. He crams the coins from his pocket into the slot, annoyed that his hands are shaking as he attempts to dial the number.

He presses the phone against his ear and waits, hoping Tony's not too busy freaking out to pick up the call. But FRIDAY would take his call anyway, so it shouldn't be a problem.

The phone rings once, twice... four times. Five times. It's on the sixth ring that Peter is met with a robotic voice. "*The number that you have dialed is not in service. Please re-enter the*

number and try again."

Not in service? Tony's plan wouldn't get canceled. He thought he typed it right, too. Peter tries again, an unsettled feeling tickling the back of his neck.

"The number that you have dialed is not in service. Please re-enter the number and try again."

"But it's the right number!" Peter tells the voice, growing frustrated. He hangs the phone up and chews at his bottom lip in thought.

This doesn't make any sense. No matter how far away Peter is, the phone wouldn't just *not* call Tony's. It's not like this is Tony's business number, it's his personal cell. Even with the amount of times that Peter will call to annoy Tony, the man still picks up his personal cell, because anyone who has access to the number is important enough to pick up the call for.

Peter picks up the phone again, pulling out the rest of his coins. He has enough to try other phones. First, he calls Pepper, begging to hear her voice on the other side of the line. She would pick up, probably annoyed at first thinking it's a scam call, but when she heard Peter, her voice would soften and she'd ask where the hell he is-

"The number that you have dialed is not in service. Please re-enter the number and try again."

He tries Natasha next. She's probably the most level-headed about Peter disappearing in the air like that, if she's up. Usually she's sleeping at this time of day, because she gets a lot of her work done at night. When she picks up, she'd maybe assume Peter was the villain that he was fighting, or another SHIELD agent, but she too, would wonder where he'd gone.

"The number that you have dialed is not in service. Please re-enter the number and try again."

It's with a heavy heart that Peter tries one more time, this call to Rhodey. The man is Tony's best friend, and he's probably with Tony right now, trying to keep him calm. If anyone would pick up the phone, it'd be him. And boy, would Peter be glad to hear his calm tone right now. Rhodey would know what to do.

"The number that you have dialed is not in service. Please re-enter the number and try again."

Okay, so, maybe all of the phones on Tony's plan are off right now. It's not like a mega-corporation of a billionaire couldn't miss a payment or two. (Who is he kidding?) Peter takes a shuttery breath and ignores the tears in his eyes, because he is *not* gonna be a baby about this, and he dials one last number: Happy.

Happy takes Peter everywhere, and he always picks up Peter's calls. He pretends to be annoyed when Peter is there, but Peter always feels safe when Happy is around. It's just how they are, really. Happy was visiting his friend that morning, that's why Peter was walking to school. Peter feels bad to get him involved in superhero stuff so early in the morning-

especially because Peter doesn't even know where he is- but it has to be done. Besides, Happy wouldn't *really* mind. He told Peter to call if anything ever happens.

The phone rings once, twice, and Peter holds his breath. On the third ring, he hears a click and his heart soars-

"Fuck off, why don't you!?! It's too early for this shit! Fuckin' spam bots, and from Gotham of all places? Take me off the fucking call list, asshole, I don't want your shitty-"

Peter hangs up the phone fast. That was *not* Happy, not even close to it. His heart sinks in his stomach, and he quickly wipes at his eyes with his jacket sleeve, furious that he's crying. He's not a damn kid, he can't get emotional the second something happens!

Peter stares at the phone, his spider-sense chattering underneath his regular anxiety. Something is wrong. Very, very wrong. *wrong, you hear?* his spider-sense agrees with him, *don't like*. Peter bites his bottom lip, trying to calm the raging storm that's brewing.

It's gonna be alright. He just- He has to remember what Aunt May taught him. If you get lost, stay in one spot. She'll come... Find him.

~~(She didn't find him that time.)~~

Peter swipes away the memory, it's too painful and it won't help him right now. It isn't even the same situation. He just has to ignore that Tony's heart isn't what it should be, and that at any moment the stress could make him collapse, and it'd be Peter's fault all over again-

He slaps his forehead with a SMACK that echoes in the street. The man at the bus stop grunts behind him, and Peter turns to see the man barely looking up from his morning paper. He shakes his head at Peter, and his voice is a low rumble like a thunder storm with an accent Peter is sure he's never heard before: a mix of a transatlantic accent with New Jersey.

"You don't look like you're from here."

Peter stares at him for a moment, and then says, "That-That depends on where 'here' is."

The man raises a brow at his paper, then finally looks up at Peter. He drinks in the words a little too long for Peter's liking- he's entirely aware of how it sounded. The man replies in an almost careful tone, "You're in the University district."

"Of- Of where?"

Again, the man is skeptical of Peter. He looks Peter up and down, his eyes particularly scanning Peter's throat before looking back up at him. "Gotham, kid. You're in Gotham."

"Gotham...?" Peter's brow furrows as he tries to think. He's never heard of a major city called Gotham, he thinks. "I've never..."

"Never been here? I can tell." The man shakes his paper to turn to the next page. *Gotham Gazette* stares at Peter, but the headline catches his attention more:

TWO-FACE AT LARGE, STAY CLEAR

“Two-Face?” Peter repeats aloud. “Who’s that?”

“Who-” That causes the man to startle, and he gawks at Peter. His cigarette almost drops out from between his teeth. “Where you from? New York? How’d you get here and not know about him?”

Peter winces, looking around the street once more. An unfamiliar street, city, and villain. And Peter thinks he’d remember the face of that villain. He’s wearing a crisp black-and-white business suit, the left half of his face mottled with what Peter thinks are burns caused from acid.

And there’s the fact that none of the phones work, and the man’s accent...

Peter didn’t...

He didn’t *time travel*, did he?

No, no that wouldn’t make sense. Peter can see the date on the man’s newspaper as well. It’s the exact same as when Peter left, and he hardly doubts a city would just *appear* here in less than a day. So maybe Peter just doesn’t know this city? And there’s a chance that their phones are just wonky?

He takes another deep breath. Everything is gonna be fine, he just needs to calm down and think. What would Tony do?

Wait, scratch that. That’s only for the lab. He’s not allowed to use that as reference outside of engineering stuff, that’s one of the rules the others (and Tony) gave him. He rephrases the question: What would Rhodey do? Or Natasha?

The man is still staring at Peter as if he were an alien. “Kid? Where are you from? You know- You... You look like you got the brunt of it. Are you-”

“Where’s the nearest library?” Peter blurts out, and the man pauses. He then points behind Peter with a frown.

“Just ‘round the corner, but, kid-”

“Thank you!” Peter cuts him off, turning on his heel and heading in that direction at a jog.

Library- a *library*, that will have a computer, that Peter can look up everything he needs to know. That will help it all make sense. If the phones aren’t working, he just has to look it up! Peter rubs at his temple, shutting his eyes and choosing to take a deep breath.

Every noise he passes on the street is making it a little hard to think. He’s used to the noise, no doubt about that. Queens isn’t a quiet place. But this noise- the noise of *this* city, was just... off. It isn’t *different* to the sounds of a busy city. But it doesn’t feel the same, it doesn’t *sound* the same. It’s just off enough that Peter finds it difficult to focus.

Why? Why is it wrong?

Not time travel, and it certainly couldn't be *dimensional* travel. Peter hadn't been close to a particle accelerator when that man attacked him. What if he got transported to a city like Atlantis?

Oh, shit, he's not in a version of Atlantis, is he? That would suck so bad. And make sense that the phone couldn't call the surface. Shoot, shoot shoot this is bad!

Peter trips going up the steps of the huge library. The man had mentioned this is a university district, so does that mean Peter is nearby a school? He peers up at the dark lettering above the entrance that looms overhead. *Gotham City Public Library*.

Now, in Queens, the library is never really empty, even on slow days. There's a huge amount of foot traffic outside, and the library hosts events every other day. There's writer's groups, kids stories time, service dog events, the like. It all makes it impossible to not have at least *a* group of folks coming and going between events. Which means that when Peter enters Gotham Public Library, he finds himself only able to describe it as "sad."

There's *no one* here.

It's clean, unlike the other buildings Peter passed by. But that *has* to be due to no one using it. The lights are dim in the reception hall, only on towards the front and most of them off towards the back. There's light coming from an office in the back, but the shades are drawn in the window, so Peter can't see what's inside. He can only hear a faint murmured heartbeat, and a woman's voice... Giving directions?

"No no no, listen, you're gonna need to go right!"

Well. It isn't the weirdest day job he's heard of.

He shrugs it off, instead heading to the right towards the computers in view. The lights might be weird, but Peter is sure the door said the library is open, so he's doing what he wants. Which he would do anyway, even if they're closed. He has to figure out where the *hell* he is.

The computer turns on with the wiggle of a mouse, and he pauses when he sees the log-in screen. There's no 'guest' option.

He double checks that the only person- the woman, who's annoyance is seeping through even over here- is still unaware that he's here. Peter digs into his pocket, praying that this device had not met the same fate that his phone did.

The tiny mechanical spider moves as soon as Peter pulls it out. Little Legs stretches out on his palm, curling into his warmth and undoing his tiny spindle legs. Peter sets him next to the computer, and Little Legs creeps up the side. It "bites" into the computer by crawling into the USB. And to Peter's surprise, the computer session opens in a record amount of time.

What usually takes five seconds took one. The login changes to the home screen, and Little Legs stays put.

“Thanks, Little Legs.” Peter mutters to the spider-bot. Tony had made Little Legs with him to help Peter get used to making AI. Little Legs is their first project together, and it settles Peter to have something of Tony here-

Ah. Speaking of.

Peter stares at his wrist as he goes to grab the mouse. Dangling from his wrist is the nanotech bracelet of Tony’s design.

Blue sky, Falling, Tony, Ash-

Peter shakes his head, grabbing his wrist and touching the bracelet in his fingers. This one has Peter’s initial on the side: “P”. Tony had sent it to him when Peter was falling, he was going to catch Peter using the Iron Man tech.

He has to contact Tony somehow. He has to let him know he’s okay, and to find him in this... random city that he’s never heard of. He goes to pull up the web browser to google this place when he sees something wrong.

The browser is *different*.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Peter stares at the tiny symbol, and he clicks it open. He can hear his own breathing as he watches the screen. Instead of Chrome, Peter is looking at a version that calls itself “Silver.” The opening page sure looks like Google, but the logo says “Abacus.”

“Wait, no.” Peter mutters, leaning back in his chair.

Why is it- No. He’s pretty sure that this one random place in America wouldn’t use a completely different browser that looks the exact same as another one. Right? That’s not- That’s not normal. Even other countries use this browser.

A new city that he’s never heard of.

A bad guy he’s never heard of.

The phones don’t work here, and if they do, they call someone else.

Peter turned to ash.

Peter turned to ash.

It should be impossible. The man hadn’t been using magic, he thinks, but- No, maybe he did? Peter thought he was making the spacial jumps using the wrist band he was wearing, and that? That was all tech. But how can a single wristband do what a particle accelerator needs

so much space for? If it wasn't magic, and it was tech, then *how did that man bring Peter to an alternate reality?*

That has to be what's going on here, and implausible as it is. It changes everything that Peter was thinking- wow, he can't believe he considered he was in Atlantis. That... was dumb of him. He'll blame it on getting knocked so hard on the ground.

Somehow, Peter ended up in an alternate universe. It's weird that it took Peter using the internet to figure that one out.

Ned is gonna lose his shit when Peter tells him about this.

Wait, no, focus, Peter!

He runs a hand down his face, resisting the urge to keel over and get sick. He doesn't even know *how* he got here, besides that the man had been the reason for it. He has no idea how to get *back* without that villain and his wrist watch.

This would be a dream come true, under any other circumstance. Finding an alternate reality, *proving* that it's possible? It's too bad that this is a nightmare right now that he's living it!

Oh, god, what if his molecules start freaking out about being in a different universe? Or what if he gets sick because his body isn't used to the air here? He's heard about that theory for time travel, and how if you jumped too far your body won't have the anti-bodies needed to keep you from getting sick. Wait, but Peter's immune system is jacked as heck after getting enhanced. Would he get sick that way? Does that mean if Peter time travels, or in this case, hops universes, would he get sick like a regular human would, or is he immune to that? And-

Oh, no, Tony is gonna freak.

If Peter gets even the tiniest of gunshots or stab wounds, they get fussy. Peter once accidentally slept off a gunshot for two days and when he woke up, he was in the hospital and everyone was fussing at him to never do it again. But how in the world are they gonna be able to track him to an *alternate universe*!?

Tony had saw him- Tony might think he's *dead*.

Peter had considered it for a split second, but Tony has no idea. He had seen Peter disappear into *ash*.

But...

He wouldn't give up, right? He wouldn't call it a day, throw up his hands and say, "*Well, guess I need a new student.*" That wouldn't happen.

Peter puts his head on the desk, trying to get some air in his lungs. It feels like someone is choking him still.

Tony will go looking for him. Or, no, Peter... It's up to Peter to find that villain and get back, isn't it? He doubts that the villain would go right back to Manhattan at this second, not with

every Avenger after him. So that villain has to be here, where Peter is.

...Hopefully.

And maybe someone else got pulled here too? Though he doubts it, if he's being truthful to himself. The man and Peter had disappeared together, and he doesn't think anyone else was attacked before him. They would have been alerted to it.

But still, he should keep an eye out, or go looking for them after he's done here. He might not have his phone, but he still has everything else that was on his person: his backpack, his spider-suit, his webshooters, his tools, and the clothes on his back: a black hoodie, baggy jeans, and tennis shoes. He also has his emergency funds that Tony and Pepper always make him carry.

Peter ignores how *wrong* the Abacus site feels to him, and he 'googles' Gotham City first. There's a number of things he needs to catch up on, starting with *where* the hell he is. That man earlier had been really surprised that Peter had never heard of them, and it feels like a bad sign.

The first article that pops up are the more recent news stories, the first being about a man named Bruce Wayne, the second about that Two-Face guy, and the third being about the mayor. Whoa, the mayor got *assassinated*?

How is that not front page news? Where Peter comes from, that would be the headline! It's not like mayors get assassinated every day! How important are this Bruce guy and Two-Face that their articles come up first?

Peter thinks it's probably a better idea to get a history of the place first, so he googles- no, abacuses?- searches. He searches for their version of Wikipedia. ...And he finds it's called the exact same thing. At least that's normal!

He clicks on *Gotham Wikipedia* with bated breath. And it doesn't take long for Peter to figure out just how bad the situation is.

Gotham isn't just a city, it's apparently a *hellhole*.

The villains- which, by the way, have their own separate Wiki page, and it's longer than any other article about Gotham- are rampant through the streets. They are always managing to escape a place called "Arkham Asylum" and get back on the streets to commit mass murders, rule their underground (blatant) crime organizations, the works. Peter feels a shiver of mortification run down his spine the more and more he reads.

Joker, Harley Quinn, Hugo Strange, Poison Ivy, Mister Freeze, Firefly, Bane, Hush, Black Mask- It just keeps going! Peter reads and reads, biting at his thumbnail the more he learns about each villain. It sounds like most of them are locked up at the moment, which is a good thing, but there are a few that are just *out* there, in Gotham, right now. Peter thought Queens had a lot of villains wondering around, but this place takes the cake.

There's even another tab for crime lords and rouges. *Red Hood* sounds particularly terrifying to Peter, and he makes a mental note to never run into that guy at all costs. In fact, he hopes he runs into *none* of them, and just the villain that he's chasing.

What kind of villain playground is this world running? How could *anyone* let it get this bad? Where is the government? Where are the heroes?

Heroes.

Heroes.

Peter's heart swells at the thought. He needs heroes! They'll be able to help him! For villains, there is always a hero around. He searches for just regular "list of heroes." The first thing that pops up is a website- *JusticeLeague.Org*.

It reminds Peter of the Avengers website, so he lets out a small breath of relief. There *are* heroes here, so maybe he'll find one and they can help him. The list pops up first, but there are no pictures save for a few. Which tracks, he thinks. Natasha never gets on camera on purpose, to hide her identity as much as possible.

Superman is the first name... Peter chooses to be polite. He did name himself *Spider-Man* after all. This guy has a cape on his costume that Tony would disapprove of, but Thor would appreciate. Then there's *Wonder Woman*, *Green Lantern*, *the Flash*, and *Batman*.

Peter recognizes that name, Batman. He was in the articles about the villains of Gotham, and he was also mentioned on the home page. Peter clicks his name, and it sends him right back to the Gotham Wiki. Peter scowls at that. So this guy doesn't have any information on him other than what the public knows.

Whatever, he can try to work with that. Peter clicks on "*vigilantes*."

Batman is the first one on the list, and there's an unknown age for him, as well as the others. It's clear that he's been fighting for decades now, so he must be old. Under that is the "*Robin List*."

Peter raises a brow. Robin list?

And... It's the most confusing list Peter has ever seen.

They're sidekicks, he thinks? They're constantly changing it up- first there was only one Robin, but now there's multiple. There's several different versions of "*Batgirl*" and there are a couple names like "*Spoiler*" and "*Signal*" that stick out as the only ones not bird or bat themed. There is no 'current' list either, just a weird amalgamation of names and time periods that don't make a lot of sense. And not a single picture of them, either! There's not even a picture of this Batman guy!

How does he get in contact with people that barely exist on their own wiki page? Spider-Man is a small time hero and even Peter has a longer wiki article on him!

This is gonna get tricky, should he-

Peter pauses.

“There is a no-metahuman rule in Gotham, set up by Batman himself.”

What?

A no-meta... metahuman? Is that their version of a mutated or enhanced person? Like... Like *Peter*?

Is he *illegal* in Gotham?

Peter can't believe it. There's no way this guy is gonna help him, if he knows Peter is a meta. So even if he stumbles across these guys somehow, he could be in danger. And, Peter realizes, he has no *proof* he's from an alternate dimension.

Would Peter trust a random superpowered person who claims to be from an alternate dimension, just swooping into Queens? Well... Probably. But would Natasha? Or any of the others? Absolutely not. They'd lock the guy up and run tests before they allow him to do or say anything else. And Peter can't...

He can't risk that, if he doesn't know these heroes. They *could* be good, and kind, and all that, and he knows it isn't so black and white. But echoes of nightmares of being poked and prodded and experimented on if he was found out itch at the back of Peter's mind. It wasn't *that* long ago that he knew if the wrong person got their hands on him, Peter wouldn't be seen again.

He almost *was* never seen again.

He has to be careful. He can't risk telling these heroes anything until he's sure they aren't a threat. It's all so complicated... He should just go look to see if anyone from his universe also came here, which is doubtful at the moment, but he has to try. Oh, wait. Peter has to check the laws.

He doesn't know what Gotham's standards are, and he certainly doesn't have the biggest trust in the police. He works with them and they having a begrudging respect for him, but until he was certified as an Avenger, Peter always had to play keep-away with them. They tried to arrest him more than once. He doesn't want to risk anything with Gotham's police- though it does sound like they suck at their job, at least a little bit. (A lot a bit.)

The only thing that Peter sees he should look out for is that there's a curfew placed on the city. He found this through a Facebook (though, it's called FamilyNotes here, which is lame), post on the GCPD page. It starts at 8PM, which is, objectively, early. But based on the replies underneath this post, no one follows this curfew. Geez, Gotham citizens are colorful with their choice of words.

Peter should try, at least. He doesn't want any cops on his case. It'll be awkward getting finger-printed and nothing showing up in the database. Or, *something*, and it goes downhill from there.

He sighs and logs out of the computer, letting Little Legs crawl up his arm and into his sleeve. He'll also have to avoid police during the daytime lest he get caught "skipping" school, but he doubts that it's as reported here as it would be reported back at home. The city is *not* in good shape, which means the schools probably aren't either.

It's getting too close to lunchtime for Peter to still be here. He got everything he needed off of the computer, and he should start looking for places to take shelter in for the unforeseen future. His hand runs over his webshooter on his wrist underneath his jacket sleeve. He should also find a place to get more web-fluid, because if he's searching for this villain, it won't just be as Peter.

Ah, shit, that's right. Suddenly, Peter's backpack feels heavy when he thinks about his Spider-Man suit inside. If Batman really doesn't allow metas into Gotham City, then that surely means that Spider-Man won't be a welcome addition. He should limit how much he's seen as Spider-Man as well. It would get dicey if these Bat-Heroes started chasing him around for being an unknown vigilante on their turf.

As Peter makes his way to the door, he notices what is different than before. Sitting at the reception desk, the woman had finally moved out of her office. Peter must have been too focused to check on her. She doesn't look up when Peter gets there, too busy typing on her phone. At least his computer was facing away from the desk, so she didn't see what he was doing.

She's wearing warmer clothes than Peter is, which makes him wonder if it's going to get colder outside soon. Her red hair is cut around her shoulders, and she's around her mid twenties, he thinks.

...?...

Huh.

His spider-sense doesn't recognize her as a threat, but it does catch that she knows he's there. Is she pretending to check her phone? Does she suspect him? If she does, then wouldn't his spider-senses try to warn him? Her heartbeat is regular and even, so she doesn't appear to be angry, if she knows Peter isn't supposed to have been messing around on the computers.

Still, he tries to sneak past her. He keeps his head low and his hands in his pockets, praying that she doesn't call him out. But alas, despite his best efforts, her cheery voice catches his attention as he almost makes it to the doors.

"No books today?" She asks. Peter looks over his shoulder to see an amused grin on her lips as she watches her phone.

He turns around to face her, shrugging one shoulder as he examines her carefully. He gives a wobbly smile and shakes his head, not seeing anything in her body language and not smelling any of the human emotions that would indicate a danger to him. Besides, his spider-senses have relaxed now.

"Nah, not today. Maybe another time."

There's an uncomfortable pause, where he can see her eyes fixated on one spot of her phone screen. She's pretending to read. Then, she finally looks up from her phone and at him through oval-shaped glasses. There's a curious glint in her eyes, that flashes with something else as she glances him over. Peter feels the tingle of his healing along his back, but he doesn't know why it sticks out to him so much.

"...We don't get a lot of people around here lately, so I know my regulars. I haven't seen you here before." She tries to sound like she's joking. Her gaze is checking Peter's face once- twice- three times, as if making sure he's there.

Just his luck.

"I, uh, just moved here." Peter says automatically. Which, yeah, technically. He *just* got here.

Amusement has left her voice. "You moved *to* Gotham?"

For the first time since getting here, Peter can understand that sentiment. The crime rate *is* unlike anything Peter has ever seen before, even the more dangerous parts of Queens. The villains in this city run rampant and do what they want. Not exactly the city for the American Dream, that's for sure.

Peter scratches his cheek, trying to think of something that doesn't sound bogus.

"Cheap rent."

Agh.

The woman nods, but she doesn't seem quite so convinced. No doubt because what lame ass excuse was that? Peter should be put down just for his bad lying skills. She doesn't let it show other than the twitch of a frown on her lips. "Yeah, I get that. My rent is damn cheap right now. You plan to be a regular here?"

"I mean, I do like libraries." Peter mutters, because he has a feeling he'll be using the library to keep an eye on the internet, and to learn more about this place. He hadn't seen anything on that villain list about the villain he's chasing, so he'll have to keep an eye out. "Though, I've never seen a library so..."

"Empty?" She finishes, and Peter nods. He was trying to be polite about it, but there's no way around it. "Yeah, the city often under funds its programs, and the public here is a little more interested in keeping it together than reading."

"That's a shame. I personally think it's easier to keep it together if you're reading. Nothing like a little escapism to season up your life." Peter grins softly.

To his relief, the woman breaks out into a bemused smile and laughs. It's bright and airy, sort of like how May's used to be. "I'm Barbara, it's nice to meet you. You should come by every now and then, if only for a little peace and quiet."

"You get that a lot here, huh?" Peter looks around the empty place, and she grins back at him. Her mood has lifted somewhat, but Peter can see the ghost of something in her eyes. She

wasn't hostile and still isn't, but she's trying to figure him out. She keeps giving him a once over. "It's nice to meet you too. My name's Peter, I'll try to drop by."

"Great!" She sounds genuinely happy about that.

Which Peter can't say anything about, because he'd be glad to have some kind of company if he worked somewhere this dead. This could be a great refuge to have should this new world get a little overwhelming for him.

Peter quickly turns to the door, but Barbara calls out to him, "Wait, before you go! You need a library card."

Peter almost winces. Almost.

He was hoping and praying she wouldn't notice. He was at the computer, after all, and it said he needed a card to log in. If she noticed something weird, she isn't acting like it. Maybe she hadn't even seen Peter at the computer at all? The divider is pretty tall, and Peter is pretty short.

"Uh, thanks." Peter says, and he glances at the reception desk.

Please present ID for library cards.

"But- uh- I can't-" Peter backtracks, putting his hand on the handle to get out. Barbara looks up in surprise. "My dad- uh- waiting for me. Lunch time. I gotta go."

"But-"

"I'll get one next time!" Peter says, cringing at himself as he flings his way out of the door. He hurries down the steps, hearing a short curse from underneath Barbara's breath.

-

Barbara has seen a lot in her life. Unfortunately, 'a lot' includes what most wouldn't want to consider. Evil is spread thick through Gotham, overcrowding what could have been a beautiful place. Violence has bred more violence, and it isn't uncommon to see bruises on someone's face.

But a kid?

Gosh, the kid that came into this library couldn't have been more than 12 years old? Or maybe a little older? It was one thing when she noticed a stranger at the computer- and she has her card holders memorized, considering no one ever comes to Gotham Public Library. But when she finally saw his face, her heart broke.

He was scared. Maybe of her, or just scared in general. Maybe scared that she'd contact someone. Peter, he called himself. Peter had bruises under his eye, spread over his cheek, as if a much older person had taken a swing at him. His lip was busted and blood had dried over his chin.

The worst was his neck. Purpling, nasty bruises in the shape of fingerprints on his skin. Someone had *choked* that kid, had ruined any innocence he could have had to violence. And he was jumpy, about to take flight at any second. He was naturally standing with his weight leaning forward, as if used to sneaking around on the balls of his feet or taking off at the first chance of danger. One wrong word, and the kid would be out the door.

She had tried to get him to stay, because she knew that a form of trust would help her when she inevitably had to ask about the bruises. She was hoping that he'd open up to her about who did it- maybe send the others their way, because those bruises were not from the hands of another kid. Her blood boiled at the thought.

But he ran before she even said something. And now she has to do this the hard way.

Because there is no way she's just going to let it go. Not when she has the means to find him, to check on him, and maybe get him out of a bad situation. Her hands started to shake when she thought about what those bruises could have come from, so she took a minute to regain her calm demeanor before sending a message in the group chat.

BATCHAT

Babs [6:30pm]: hey guys, just met a new yorker. he's no older than like. 12 years old I think?

Timmy [6:31pm]: and this is relevant to the batchat why

Babs narrows her eyes at her phone. He had better be tired and forgetting not to sass her.

Babs [6:32pm]: because he moved TO gotham today and looked like he dropped out of the sky. you should have seen this kid. his face and neck are covered in bruises and his clothes are dirty like he just got beat up or hit by a car or something

Timmy [6:34pm]: okay, yeah, sounds important

Yeah, it sure is. Oh, she almost forgot about the other thing.

Babs [6:34pm]: also, he hacked the library computer

Dicko [6:35pm]: he what

Babs [6:35pm]: he hacked the computer

Timmy [6:36pm]: ...like, how?

How is a question that she still hasn't answered. He's a pretty young kid, so he has to be pretty smart in order to figure that one out. They don't have guest log ins because of how bad the area is, but people just present an ID and Barbara logs it. Doesn't even have to be a real ID, just something that they can trace back to anyone ordering bomb parts off of Abacus.

Peter being covered in bruises like that, and also getting into her computer system? It leaves a bad taste in her mouth Her immediate thought was that Peter was forced to do it. Forced to order something on the computer so that it couldn't trace back to them. It wouldn't be the first time that something like it happened in Gotham. He's a smart kid, and that can get him into deep shit.

Babs [6:37pm]: i noticed he was at the computers after i helped out Signal earlier. you know how it is here, you need a card to log in, and i didn't recognize him, so he didn't have one. i was a little suspicious so i started a conversation with him. his accent is from new york

Babs [6:40pm]: tried to get him a card and he said he'd get one next time and sprinted out of here. i wondered if maybe he just used a friend's card but when i checked the logs, the last card holder to log in was Damian, a few months ago

Babs [6:43pm]: i don't know, i just thought it was weird that anyone would move TO gotham with a kid that young and then leave them to wander around the city alone? he had no parent with him, and he's hurt. badly. and then he caught my attention with the 'hacking my computers and leaving no trace behind' thing. if i hadn't caught him on his way out, then i never would have known he was there in the first place

Dicko [6:45pm]: sounds like serious trouble

She resists the urge to say 'no shit.' She can only imagine what could have happened to Peter. A kid that young shouldn't know violence, and the fact that he was brought *to* Gotham unsettles her greatly.

It's not...

Barbara almost pauses. It couldn't be a trafficking case, could it? Or a gang thing?

Babs [6:46pm]: at the very least, i'm concerned about why he looked so jumpy when we talked. he sounds like a sweet kid, but if he's new to town and all by himself, he might get dragged into something. again, from the looks of it. if anyone else notices he can hack, they might try to take advantage of him

Dicko [6:47pm]: guess we keep an eye out 4 him 2night and check on him. did u get a name?

She sighs in relief, despite knowing that Dick wouldn't even hesitate to help out. She also has no doubt that Jason was paying attention to the chat, even though he swears he doesn't. He would be keeping an eye out as well, and the others would too.

Babs [6:48pm]: Peter, no last name. he's about 5'5", scrawny, wearing a black hoodie and blue jeans, curly brown hair, brown eyes, tan skin. bruises on his neck look like hands from someone older.

-

As the night starts to settle over Gotham City, Peter feels a sense of foreboding settling in on him. It's a familiar and awful ache in his chest, that leaves him a little breathless.

After he left the library, he spent the rest of the day trying to find anyone that could be from his universe. He followed his spider-senses, but they just led him to weird places, like outside of hardware stores or the police station in another district than the one he appeared in. Neither of which are helpful to Peter right now, so he left it alone.

The trail is cold. There's no sign of that villain anywhere, or, if there was, it blended into *this* city too easily.

Peter passed by a lot of crime that he forced himself to stay out of. He could handle the muggings and the petty robberies, but he was also certain he'd get outed as a meta, and he doesn't want to introduce Spider-Man so soon. Not until he gains his bearings, or wraps his head around this situation.

He's been on a wild goose chase all day, searching for someone that doesn't seem to exist, and his prize was a whole lot of nothing. Well, not *nothing*. He did find a good burger place to eat lunch, and now for dinner, he's got Chinese take out that reminds him of home.

With it getting dark outside, Peter switched from the streets to the rooftops. He dangles his legs over the side of one now, twirling his fork in the noodles and taking a large bite as he looks out over the city. This rooftop is particularly high, so Peter can keep an eye out for anything that seems out of the ordinary (crime). The cool air bites at the tips of his ears and nose, but he's warm underneath the jacket that Happy gave him.

He lets a little shiver out as the wind passes by, reflecting on this *insane* place. It's... a mess, if only to simplify it.

His spider-senses go off on every street corner; the city is packed full of so many people that he's sure there's not enough room for them. It's even worse in one section that the people have dubbed, so creatively, "Crime Alley", which used to be called Park Row. The sign

outside the limit didn't have to tell him not to head that direction. He took one look in there and his spider-senses rattled off *danger danger danger!* So he turned tail and went the opposite direction.

There are fires in the distance of the skyline, mottling the night sky with acrid black smoke, only noticeable through the greenish yellow hue of the city lights. It's just odd enough to not look like home, with nothing standing out as familiar, while also being something like it.

It makes him feel more nervous than he should be. He chomps onto an eggroll, his legs swinging back and forth in thought.

Spider-Man just 'helps out the little guy.' That's what Peter wants, has always wanted. Aunt May and Uncle Ben always taught him what matters, and what matters most are his neighbors. He helps old ladies with their groceries, listens to old men tell their stories, helps kids with their science homework and fairs, and that... He's good with that. It's more than enough of what he wants.

But, Spider-Man is also an Avenger.

They always remind him of that. They don't expect Peter to fight aliens from outer space, or the world threatening crap that swings overhead. They actually *prefer* it this way, watching Peter use his powers for something as simple as neighborhood clean up.

He can always see it in their eyes, like they're watching the future through him. They never got a choice with what to do for their powers and abilities, they were thrown into the fray and left to figure it out. Forced to, lest they let everyone down. So Peter thinks that's why they're so eager to keep him out of the big stuff, and... Well, it's not like he had a chance to be cared for, before. So he lets them fuss over him, lets them care now. It feels nice.

An Avenger who gets cats out of trees is still an Avenger, so he can't let them down. If they were here, they'd have a clue what to do. Peter has to do right by them, because he's on their team. He's just as much a hero as the rest of them. He can't let them down, nor can he give up.

He's sure that Tony and the others are looking for him, so he has to look for them too. He wipes away a stress tear from his face, pretending it was never there at all.

But this still... It all reminds him of when he first ran from his last foster house.

That day, it had been cold, and Peter had been truly, completely, alone.

No friends,

No family,

Nothing waiting for him. He was in a brand new jungle, with powers he didn't fully understand, and grieving a life he was supposed to have.

He wasn't even reported missing until a week after he left, because Westcott was under the impression that Peter would crawl back there and apologize. Well, like *hell* was he going to

do that.

He *made* it work then, and he has something great going for him now. He used to be lonely, when he was just ‘Parker’ and Spider-Man. He had a lot of friends, but he always went back to the chicken coop on an abandoned roof that was his shelter and wished he had a real home to go to. He wished he could hear May call his name for dinner one more time, he wished he could run to Ben’s arms and get a big hug. It was silly to imagine, and childish to wish for.

He had resigned himself to that life until he met the Avengers. More specifically, Tony. They gave him a family before *and* after they found out that Peter was a homeless orphan. They protected him, prevented him from ever having to go back to foster homes that would ultimately fail to love him. And that happened after they found out Peter had been lying to their faces for months.

Peter had left his last foster house when he was 12, a week before Christmas. He had been bitten by the spider and-

And, well, a lot happened that night.

He doesn’t like to dwell on that part.

He had started up Spider-Man a few months after getting his bearings with being homeless. After a year and a half, Spider-Man had a reputation, and so did “Parker.”

That was the name he went by, instead of Peter. It was close enough without it being a lie, so it was his default answer when someone asked him. Parker wasn’t Peter, he was free. Just like Spider-Man isn’t Peter, because no one could hurt Spider-Man and get away with it. Parker may not have been going around stopping crime, but he was helping people. He became pretty well known in his more frequent areas as someone to call when you’re having trouble, because Peter could always find somewhere for them to go. To be safe.

He met Steve and Bucky first, doing just that. He was following a lead of a kidnapper that got away when he was just Parker, and before he could figure out how to get out of a mugging, they were already taking them out. Steve had patched up his face and Bucky had thrown the muggers in the nearest police station.

Peter had given them his name- “Parker.” They offered to walk him home (he didn’t have one) and to call his mom (she’s, like, real dead), and Peter just pointed them in the direction of the kidnapper he was tailing as a distraction, then booked it out of there. He thought that would be the end of it, but he ran into the two of them again a week later at his favorite restaurant, Dug Out.) Man, he misses Biggie’s food right now.)

And then Sam Wilson helped him out of a fight with an older teen that had a grudge against him, and brought him to have lunch with him and Dr. Banner.

It’s amazing what an hour long conversation can do. They had no reason to think that Parker was anything but some scraggly poor genius in a bad neighborhood in Queens, but they sat with him for lunch and Dr. Banner had the nerve to be impressed. Find Peter sitting in Stark

Tower learning from Dr. Banner himself, eating dinner at the Tower every other night, and growing close to Tony when the man poached him from Dr. Banner.

The rest was history... save for Peter getting kidnapped by what ended up being a large crime syndicate that was snatching up kids and teens to try and experiment on them, and finding out that was why the Avengers were all over Queens and trying to contact Spider-Man.

Peter still remembers wondering if Tony would write it off. If he'd just wonder for a week or two why Peter stopped coming around, or if he'd keep digging. He had spent months trying to learn more about Peter, like it was some sort of game. At least, that's what Peter thought it was. He thought that would be it, that he'd have to save himself and all of those other kids, all by himself. He waited for his chance to escape while strapped down on a cold metal experiment table, recalling nightmares of this exact scenario.

And then Tony tore the roof off the lab.

Tony practically destroyed the entire building while looking for Peter. He'll never forget how tightly Tony had hugged him when he saw Peter, how it felt like Tony thought Peter would disappear if he let go. That was the moment Peter really understood the lengths Tony had gone to just to find him- to find some kid who'd been lying about his name and where he came from the entire time Tony knew him. Peter thought no one would save him, but Tony went looking for him.

That had meant the world. Peter spent so long fighting and fending for himself. And Tony went *looking for him*. He was there.

Tony became his foster-dad and his mentor after that day, and Peter sleeps soundly at night. He no longer talks to himself at dinner, but talks to his mentors. Sure, he gets annoyed at the commute to Queens every night, but this is a *good* life now. He lives with Tony and Pepper, he has his own room- Pepper and Peter almost have Tony giving up on the 'no dog' front. Peter has a life he thought he'd never deserve, once upon a time.

It's not... it's not a typical family. Peter knows that Tony is still just his foster dad, and they haven't really spoken about much else beyond that. But Peter holds it dearly to his heart all the same, pretends that Tony and Pepper *want* him, want him, because they had moved the mountains to get Peter in their house at all. The idea that if this all goes wrong, if Peter can never go back, and he'll get stuck at the beginning again?

That terrifies him. Just a ~~lot~~ little.

He's eating alone for the first time in months. Sitting atop a roof in an unfamiliar city, in an unfamiliar world, looking down at the people below and wondering what's in store for him.

~~Scared that he'll mess it up, like he messes everything up.~~

...He made it work back then, and he's gonna make it work now. He's not gonna give up just because it's going to be hard. Peter fought for the family that he has right now, he's not going to let some *asshat* take that away from him. If that means navigating through Crime Central and fighting off this mysterious Batman, he'll do it.

He can already think of what it'll be like when he gets back to his own world, when all of this is over. Everyone will let him pick dinner (tradition is that whoever had the last crazy adventure gets to pick what they all eat), and they'll talk about this crazy alternate world that Peter went to. One day it'll turn into a distant, funny memory.

They'll have *loads* of fun with the superheroes and vigilantes of this place. What were their names again? Nightwing... Red Robin, Batman... something with an S? Spoil...? There were more, he remembers...

...behind... hello!

Peter's senses tingle from his neck down his spine, but it isn't danger.

He hadn't heard the incredibly calm heartbeat until now, not with the noise of the city. But he can hear them now, lurking in the shadows somewhere behind him. There's the gentle pad of a foot, the breath out as they see him. They're approaching from another rooftop, but why?

It's not danger, like he said. Just an alert that someone is watching, has noticed him too. But what are *they* doing on a roof?

Peter turns to face behind him, eyes scanning the dark shadows. He can sort of see a figure there, can hear their heart spike. Are they scared?

Of him?

Why would-

Oh.

He's not in costume, and whoever is in the shadows is used to lurking. Peter shouldn't have been able to spot them.

Taking another bite of his food, Peter turns back around, as if he hadn't saw anything there. He chews for a few seconds, an anxious sweat starting to form as the seconds tick by. Why are they just staring at him? They aren't even speaking, they're just watching him eat. Is it that weird for him to be up here?

Should he say something? Or should he-

"You shouldn't sit on the ledge like that, it's super dangerous."

Peter startles, surprised they actually spoke. He thought they were content with hiding in the shadows, but apparently not. He turns to look behind him again, one of his cheeks filled with food and he hopes it doesn't make him look stupid.

The figure is no longer hiding in the dark, but instead leaning on a wall in the light. Peter blinks at him, his mind flashing with the description of his costume- because the wiki article never gave a picture. He recalls a plan to avoid the vigilantes of this world for now, but that's apparently easier said than done.

Peter thinks this might be Nightwing. He has an even tan, a domino mask covering his eyebrows, the tops of his cheeks, and his eyes. Preventing his identity from being known, much like Peter before his final mask design.

Wavy black hair is pulled back to stay out of his face, and his suit is cooler than Peter imagined. Blue and black, with a bold bird design on the front. The wings spread into blue stripes down his arms. He has the build of Captain America, maybe a little more muscular. The man is somewhere in his mid to late twenties, probably, and he looks... worried.

Oh, right. Because Peter is dangling his legs off the side of a really tall building. Duh-doi, Parker.

Peter carefully picks his to-go box off of his lap and swings his legs back over the side to look safer, all the while glancing at Nightwing. The vigilante looks better with Peter not hanging off the side, but he's more satisfied when Peter scoots away from it altogether.

"Uh, hi?" Peter says after swallowing his food.

Nightwing steps closer, calm and collected. Peter's spider-senses do not move, no indication that he should watch out for this man. He takes a seat in front of Peter, matching his criss-cross style and setting his hands on his knees.

He's very relaxed in his movements, but Peter can sense an apprehension there. And for some reason, when Peter's eyes take in the small details of his face that he *can* see, he looks...

He looks like a face that Peter hasn't seen in a long time, but Peter can not recall a memory or a name.

"Hi," Nightwing smiles, and Peter wishes he could see where the man was looking. It makes it harder to tell what he's thinking, and his heartbeat is exceedingly calm in a way that reminds Peter of Natasha. "You know there's a curfew, right?"

Curfew? Oh yeah. That's why he's up here in the first place.

So it must be weird that he's up here, after all. He isn't used to that. Sure, no one is really dangling their feet off of the side of buildings, but people have roof parties, and he stumbles across the lone straggler or smoking groups in New York. Maybe Gotham is too crime-infested for even that bit of fun.

"...They said not to be on the *street* after dark." Peter points out slowly. "This is a roof."

Nightwing stares at him, a tiny, almost exasperated, smile on his lips. "You... It's still dangerous to be up here. How'd you even *get* up here?"

"Fire escape." Peter says, thankful he checked for that earlier. He gestures towards where it is vaguely, then tilts his head in thought. "...You're that Nightwing guy, right? Are vigilantes enforcing curfew? Aren't you busy?"

Nightwing shakes his head, leaning back to lean on his hands casually, as if he regularly chats with civilians like this. Maybe he does. Peter does it. "I *am* that Nightwing guy, but no, I'm

not enforcing curfew. I'm just making sure you knew that, since you could get into trouble that way."

Peter shrugs, continuing to eat his food. Vigilante be darned, he's not letting this get cold and go to waste. "There was no clause stating I couldn't chill on a roof."

"I guess you're right." Nightwing doesn't sound mad about it, which is good. He actually sort of sounds like a nice guy, which means this is more information on him than Peter ever got from online. He supposes he's relaxed too much around the man, but his spider-senses not ringing makes it easier to do so. "Are you... sight seeing?"

"You could say that."

"What's there to look at, though?" Nightwing is doing a *great* job of selling his city. Well, Peter guesses that he'd have a hard time trying to be prideful of where he's from if Queens was this bad. Even though Queens was super dangerous before Peter started acting as Spider-Man, it had never been Gotham bad.

"I dunno. I'm new here. I guess old habits die hard."

Nightwing tilts his head at him. "You moved *to* Gotham? Where were you before? New York?"

Ah, his accent must give him away. He'll be glad to have a voice modulator if he runs into the vigilantes while in his spider-suit.

"Queens." Peter answers, and he wonders how often he's going to get that question in that exact same tone. "Got a little homesick and came up here, but it's not the same."

It's not a lie. Peter is missing the Avengers right now, and their obsession with Scarpetta's Italian takeout. He's missing late night lab conversations with Tony, and missing the familiarity of Queens. Here is different, yet reminding Peter of being alone. He doesn't like it.

"You always hang out on roofs?"

You have no idea.

"The view is much better in Queens." Peter smiles into his food, looking up at Nightwing, who doesn't take offense. He chuckles at the comment, but the worry doesn't appear to be going away.

In fact, Peter feels another spider-tingle. This time, it's as though Nightwing's gaze is directed at him, but Nightwing is turned away to look at the skyline at the moment. Peter doesn't like that his mask covers that.

"Why Gotham?"

Peter had said earlier to Barbara that it was cheap rent, but that doesn't make as much sense now that he's had time to think about it. He settles on a lie, though he feels bad for telling it.

“My dad’s business, I guess. Wasn’t told much else.”

Nightwing takes a moment to reply, and Peter wonders if that was a weird response.

“What does he do?”

Peter shrugs. If he was older, feigning ignorance would be harder. But he’s 14, and he can pretend not to know. “I dunno, old man stuff? He doesn’t talk about it with me.”

Nightwing smiles again, but it’s a thin one. “I wish I could say you might like it here, but…”

“But your city’s crime rate is 100%?” Peter takes another bite of eggroll. Nightwing nods knowingly, and Peter’s eyes glance towards the smoke-filled horizon. “Honestly, I’m not too worried about it. There *are* vigilantes here. Don’t know if you heard.”

Meaning, well, Batman and those Robins. But him, too. He’s a superhero, even though Nightwing only sees a scrawny kid. Or, well, he’s not really out there defeating aliens from outer space, and his hardest villain to beat is Black Cat, the cat burglar, so it’s more like just a regular hero/vigilante stuff. But he’s been told his strength would set him up for superheroness if he wanted. Peter can take care of himself, he’s done it before. People underestimate him only because Peter isn’t normal, and they have no idea.

Nightwing finally relaxes, sitting up straight again. “You have a lot of confidence in us?”

“Well, *maybe*, after I see your track record.” Peter pokes his food with his fork, taking on an air of mock superiority. “Got a resume I can look at, Mr. Nightwing?”

“I left in the Batmobile.” Nightwing feigns disappointment, and holding his hands up in a *What Can You Do?* motion. Peter pauses on that word- *Batmobile?* *Seriously?*- but Nightwing doesn’t notice. “You’ll have to trust me on this one.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I get kidnapped or something.” Peter jokes. But this time, it falls flat.

Nightwing is quiet for a long pause, and he eventually sighs as if holding a great weight. His voice is thick with an emotion Peter can’t name, when he asks, “So what happened?”

Peter stares at him. Is it that easy to tell Peter is from an alternate dimension? It took one look? Is Peter that out of place here? “Huh? What do you mean?”

Nightwing reaches up to touch his own neck, then points at Peter. “To *you*, kid. What happened to you?”

Peter’s back itches with the healing factor, a reminder that it wasn’t done repairing whatever happened to Peter when he crashed earlier. There’s a distinct lack of that healing itch on his neck, and Peter hadn’t paid much attention to how often he had been clearing his throat, or how scratchy his voice was.

He forgot it was even there. His healing factor had still been working on his back, because it always focuses on the worst injury first- oh, wow. He’d been parading around the city

looking purple and yellow all day without even knowing. *That* explains the crazy looks he kept getting. How stupid could he be?

And then, Peter recalls the grip that had reached around his throat, so *tight*, so *angry* with him even though Peter did nothing wrong, that reminds him of Westcott's house-

"I don't know." Peter blurts out. He directs his gaze to his food instead of Nightwing's stare. How can the guy have *such* a piercing gaze without Peter seeing his eyes? And who says *I don't know* about that? Is Peter *really* a genius, like everyone keeps telling him? He thinks he might be a fucking idiot.

"It hurts, doesn't it? You can tell me what happened, I can help you."

Help?

Peter doesn't think so.

He's just a random street kid right now. A meta-human, as they call it, who shouldn't be in Batman's city. With *no* proof that he's from an alternate dimension- and could, actually, be seen more as a threat than someone they need to help. And Peter remembers the times before when he was hurt by adults who wanted to 'help', before the Avengers. He remembers being strapped down to a table, being poked and prodded like his nightmares always showed him, remembers feeling weak when Tony got him out of there.

Strangers are bad. Peter knows. Strangers can hurt you. Or they send you somewhere where you'll get hurt. And they'll think they're doing something right.

He stopped trusting those kinds of people a long time ago. Even if they fully mean well, they just wanted to send Peter into the system. Or back home to his foster parents. Peter can't stand the thought of those places, it hurts more than the bruises on his neck.

Nightwing's gaze feels like it's burning through Peter's skull. Trying to get him to look up.

"Was it your dad?"

Peter shoots up to glare at him, anger sparking up too fast, but Peter can't hold it back. He fumes at Nightwing, "Don't *ever* say that. He would *never* hurt me."

Not Tony. Tony would never hurt me, not like the others.

Nightwing's hands rise in surrender, his eyebrows raising and his heartbeat picking up for a second, before calming once more. "I'm sorry, kid, I just- It's bad. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine." Peter stabs his fork a little too aggressively into his plate.

"So if not your dad, then who?"

"Just- a guy- I don't remember!" Peter scowls at Nightwing, then pointedly looks away with a *very much not childish thank you very much* huff. "Aren't you busy?"

“I’m not-”

The buzzing from Nightwing’s comm interrupts him. Peter raises a brow, and Nightwing knows he’s been caught. The man huffs in frustration, jumping to his feet and stepping towards the ledge.

“And off he goes.” Peter mutters, knowing the all too familiar cut off of a hero. He can’t *help* Peter. Getting back to Tony and Pepper will help him. He can already hear his mentors telling him to be careful teaming up with someone, because even people who appear to be good guys can have an agenda.

“I’ll see you again,” Nightwing promises, and Peter shakes his head. This guy is *insistent*. “You’ll catch a cold if you stay out here too long. Make sure to get inside and rest, kid, even if it is a Saturday.”

“Thanks, *Mom*. ”

Nightwing sets a hand on his heart in mock offense, one foot on the ledge and the wind tousling his hair. There’s a chatter from his comm that sounds like more than one voice this time. It almost sounds like when the Avengers jab at each other and it sets off a round of teasing. The familiarity of it strikes Peter hard, and he looks away from Nightwing’s face.

“...Stay safe.” Nightwing tells him, and it feels heavy in the air.

Peter forces himself to look up at him, because the guy was only trying to help. He doesn’t know what else he sees in Nightwing’s expression before he takes off into the night.

He leaps from the side of the building with a graceful twist, an air of extravagance that reminds Peter of a circus act- a high rise leap of a performer. It’s beautiful and practiced, and Peter itches to copy it, telling himself *later*. He extends a grappling hook into the air at a safe distance, almost similar to the way Peter would swing his web, and he’s gone in a moments notice. Leaving Peter alone of the roof once more.

He sighs to himself, biting back a frown and setting the empty to-go box to the side.

He feels guilty, getting so annoyed. It’s just- Peter, he knows Tony. He trusts Tony, one of the only people in the world who knows exactly what Peter went through. The man would never raise a fist, let alone his words, in Peter’s direction. So for some reason, the idea that Tony could do something like leave bruises on Peter, it made his skin crawl and that anger he tries to push down crawl up, loud and nasty.

But Nightwing was only trying to help... If he sees Nightwing again, he should apologize for snapping.

Peter was worried about meeting Gotham’s vigilantes, but apparently as long as he’s in civilian clothes, he’ll be fine. For Nightwing, at least. He knows nothing about the others. If it went as well as it could have gone, maybe he... *could* trust Nightwing? But Peter has no proof, nothing to say that he isn’t crazy.

Man, Peter has the weirdest luck. He's always meeting superheroes randomly like this. That's how the Avengers found out about him, when they were running around Queens for something entirely different. They kept running into Peter, and adopted him soon after that.

But that won't happen here. He has a family already.

-

Dick stretches out his arm, wincing when he feels the pull of his muscle. He almost botched his shoulder after a bad landing earlier. He can only blame himself for that- he had gotten distracted, thinking about Peter.

It was even worse than what Babs had described to him. He was blatantly hoping that when he got there it would be early Halloween makeup, because the holiday isn't *that* far off from now. But it wasn't, he could tell based on the way the kid reacted. He knew real injuries when he saw them.

Firstly, Dick nearly had a heart attack when Peter had turned around. He thought he was being quiet, but the kid locked eyes with him. As in, *made eye contact* with him. At least, he thought so. He must have just heard Dick, somehow. Maybe his feet landed just a little too rough?

But it wasn't just that. It was that when Peter turned around, the bruises on his face were *that* bad. They had to have come from big fists, they were that large on his cheek. His lip busted, and his neck...

Dick has to take a deep breath.

He's a cute kid, baby faced and innocent eyes. And he's got a clever sense of humor, one that seems a little adult for such a young person. Clearly, he had to grow up faster than he should have. He was familiar, somehow, and Dick couldn't shake off the hurt that ate away at his chest when he saw him.

Maybe it was that the kid has his mother's eyes- not just because of the strikingly similar color, but that they held a hope in them even when getting defensive. Or it could be that Peter reminded him of Jason. Of all of his siblings. Of himself. A kid that grew up too fast because the world has been cruel to him. He's too young to look so scared.

And *scared* is what he was.

He froze when Dick pointed out the bruising. And his face had crumbled, shutting himself off before Dick could find anything out about him. A fear that runs bone deep had flashed in his eyes, and Dick believes he shouldn't have been surprised when Peter ended up getting defensive. Fear does that to people.

"What are you glaring at the floor for?"

Dick purses out his bottom lip, furrowing his brows but not looking up from the ground. His suit is halfway off, too tired to undo it fully. Or he's taking his time because he's still

distracted, mind racing with thoughts.

Tim isn't the same. He couldn't wait to get into a clean robe, wearing slippers on his feet and obviously going straight to the shower. But he had stopped when he saw Dick wasn't moving from his spot on the bench.

"Hello? Earth to Nightwing?" Tim waves his hand in front of Dick's face.

"Babs ran a background check on foster-kids going into Gotham." Dick says slowly.

"Are you talking about that Peter kid?" Tim tilts his head to the side, and Dick nods. There's a moment where Tim contemplates what to say next, always so careful with his words. "... What did you two talk about that has you like this?"

They had only heard the last bit of their conversation, after Dick's comms were forcibly connected by Babs to the others. Killer Croc had gotten out of Arkham, and Dick couldn't waste time and had to go look. But he didn't think Peter was a waste of time.

"It was *bad*, Tim." Dick finally looks up at the other. Tim frowns down at him, concern etched on his face. "The bruising. Someone tried to kill him, there's no other explanation. I'm *seriously* worried for his life."

Tim is quiet for a moment, an unease settling on him. It's unfortunate, but they see a lot of kids with bruises. Mostly from kids in gangs, or kids who got targeted at school, whatever the case. But it isn't often that they worry this much, or see bruising like that. Not on a kid, anyway.

"Babs said his neck was bruised...?"

"Someone older had to have done it. You can *see* the finger prints, the hands weren't from a kid." Dick's anger rises, and he pinches the bridge of his nose. He stretches out his shoulder again, growing more tense by the second. "He closed off when I pointed them out, swears that his dad didn't do it."

"How do you know he's a foster kid?" Tim sits down on the bench next to Dick.

"There are no families moving to Gotham that have a 'Peter' who matches the description, so Babs ran through foster families too, just in case. It's a short list of kids from outside coming here, which isn't a surprise. Peter isn't on that list either. So we don't *know* if he's a foster kid or not."

"Did she check Gotham's records? Maybe he was lying, and he's been here longer. He was trying not to get caught doing something, right? He hacked into the library computer without a log in." Tim's voice lowers, and Dick can tell that this part of Peter's story had caught his interest. "Maybe we should check if there are any imports coming in..."

"Imports of what?"

"Drugs, guns, bombs..."

“I don’t think the kid is involved in that kind of stuff...”

Tim sighs as if he doesn’t want to tell Dick this. “He may not have had a choice. He might be a good kid who just got... caught up in it. And... Well, I don’t know if you’ve considered it yet, but what if it’s a trafficking case?”

Dick looks back down at the floor. He can’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t the case, but he has no evidence to support it. He just keeps thinking back to the face that the kid made. He sincerely hopes that trafficking isn’t what happened to Peter, he’d rather it be... No, there’s nothing he’d *rather* about it. He wishes none of it happened. But *please* don’t let it be *that*.

“You want us to check on him?”

He turns to his brother, recognizing the tone. “By ‘check’ you mean-”

“Don’t call it stalking. Just call it watching. Checking.” Tim suggests. “You wanna make sure he’s alright, right? We’ll keep an eye out for him, and you know, if it just so happens we’re passing by-”

“Waiting outside his window-”

“-*passing by* and we see something going on, we can put a stop to it.” Tim finishes, and Dick can’t find it in himself to say anything against it. He considered it too, but- “I know you’re gonna be going back and forth between here and Bludhaven for a while, considering we need the help with Croc, Two-Face, *and* the Firefly out. You’re gonna be stretched thin, and I know you aren’t gonna *stop* worrying about the kid. But it would help knowing we’re watching him, right?”

Tim says it’s easy to read Dick, that it’s always clear what he’s thinking. Dick is always interpreting their emotions, and finds it hard to cover up his own. He wears everything on his face, in his eyes. Tim’s offer isn’t just coming from an interest in the fact that the kid is hard to find.

“Thanks, Timmy,” Dick reaches up to mess with his hair, and Tim groans and leans back from him.

“I’ll take back the offer if you keep messing with me.”

“Messing with you?” Dick scoffs, standing up and pushing both hands into his hair. Tim tries to grab at his wrists to make him stop. “I’m showing brotherly affection!”

“You’re attacking me is what you’re doing!”

“Deal with my love and care!”

"I'd rather willingly update my medical file." Tim lies, like a lying liar.

-

Peter couldn't wait to get out of there, anxious that Nightwing would choose to come back the very same night just to ask him more questions that Peter doesn't have the answers to. He can't afford letting the vigilante get nosy, because it wouldn't take much for him to figure out something is up with Peter.

He took his shelter underneath a water silo- and it was *not* lost on him that he did the exact same thing when he ran away from Westcott's house- and dumped out his backpack's contents after his conversation with Nightwing. It took less than five minutes to find one, but Peter ended up searching for an extra ten just because he didn't want to hang around that same spot and be more easy for Nightwing to find.

Back in his home universe, he had taken a chicken coop and an old, empty water silo and used that as his shelter when he was homeless. It was all connected through fencing and wood and a lot of sweat and tears to make it livable. It was the best that he could do, far enough away from people in an abandoned neighborhood, so nobody ever saw Spider-Man coming and going. He had turned the old chicken nests into cubbies and shelves for his belongings (and he *did* have a lot, considering Peter was constantly finding junk to turn into Spider-Man stuff, and also books and notebooks that he got his hands on.) He even had the privilege of battery powered Christmas lights he strung up on the inside of the coop and the outer part where the mesh fencing was.

It hadn't been a *house*, but it was insulated and had food and a mattress that wasn't diseased, so Peter liked it. It was his very own place, his spot in the world that no one else could get to. Peter sometimes goes back to visit it on the rough days after he was taken in by Tony, but he found that it was a lot less of a home than it used to feel. So he would go home.

But here, he doesn't have any of that. No Christmas lights, no chicken cubbies, no mattress. He uses some old wooden boards that were stacked against the roof entrance to make walls (though there are cracks in between them) and left an opening for a sliver of light. It gave him some illusion of privacy and a break from the wind. It wasn't insulated at all, so the cold still bothered him, but it wasn't that bad of a night. At least, not yet. He can hear a couple arguing underneath him in their apartment, so he made sure the door to the roof was locked for good measure.

Scanning the dumped contents of his backpack... it's evident that the supplies he has are limited.

A few granola bars, his school notebooks, a textbook for English, and his emergency money. As well as his Spider-suit and mask, his webshooters, and an extra jacket. Which will come in handy as a blanket, while his backpack can be a pillow for the night. It won't be comfortable, but he's dealt with a loss less on hand.

Peter opened his notebooks after stuffing everything else back in the backpack, popping open a pen and forcing himself to focus. Using his memory (and a lot of muttering), he wrote down everything that he could remember about the guy that attacked him. He drew (though, he is not an artist) the man's face and his hands, but more specifically, he drew that wrist piece that he wore.

Spacial jump technology, of all things. Teleportation that led to multiversal travel- it's practically unheard of, outside of magic. It's still theory for science... but science is just magic that can be explained, right? Peter knows there are a few people that can teleport, but he was never privy to their names or anything like that. They were just mentioned in passing.

The wrist tech looked like a watch and a gauntlet of some kind, but the man's fingers were visible. The piece started at his knuckles and pulled back to stop around mid-forearm, clinging to the skin there tight so that it's hard to remove.

It was a tech he's never seen before. It was unusual, and clunky, like it had just been put together. Or, rather, used with weird junkyard parts. Peter would know, because his tech looked like that before he had Tony.

Tony...

Peter writes down his name, underneath *Stark Tower*:

The man had approached Peter only a block away from the tower- that can't be coincidence. Tony is *known* as Iron Man, and Peter is known as his foster-son. There had been two months of paparazzi and social media trying to figure him out, and they never got anywhere because Tony had wiped clean any sort of record that Peter had online before then. Peter's only able to go out on his own because he's Spider-Man.

...Though he's sure that will be amended when he gets back...

Peter sighs at the lack of privacy he's going to get. Tony might consider putting him on lock down for a couple months, but Natasha might talk him down. Maybe. It's a hit-or-miss on that call. His mentors are iffy about what is and isn't chill. Multiverse travel through forced kidnapping sounds like Peter is going to get locked up in the Tower like Rapunzel. But instead of Ned calling down for Peter's hair, he'll take the elevator.

Focusing. He's focused. That doesn't matter right now.

What could this man's motivation be? Revenge on one of the superheroes in the Tower? But they wouldn't target Peter... not unless it's something for Tony.

He considered that maybe it could be that he's Spider-Man, but he doesn't know if this villain *knows* that. Because most villains, they'll refer to him as his super-hero persona, but this one called him "Stark's kid."

So it has something to do with Tony. And honestly... Peter's willing to bet that it was for tech.

That wrist watch has done something *incredible*, considering where Peter is at right now. It's an unachievable feat, and yet, here he is. Why would the man risk attacking Peter, when Iron Man was right there around the corner? When the *Avengers* are around the corner? He's *desperate*, that's what. And Peter thinks he can figure out what someone like him was desperate for: tech for his work.

It makes sense to him. If Peter created something like that, he would be itching to make it better with Stark Tech, not some junkyard parts he'd been using.

But why not just ask? Why fling Peter into another universe? If he had shown up at Tony's door and was willing to show off what he made, Tony would have hired him, or at least helped fund him after a thorough background check.

Well... The man has anger issues. That could be why he didn't do that.

He had been so... *angry*, so volatile, when Peter backed away from him. It was like a switch went off in his head. Peter couldn't let him hurt someone else who was on the street around them, but without his mask on to protect his identity? He panicked, and that allowed the man to grab him.

He's unstable, and he probably knows that. Tony would never work with someone that could do something like that, that's why he recently fired someone else. Tony already went through dealing with the fact that his tech had been used to hurt people, and since then he's been much more hands-on about choosing who gets access to it.

This guy, he grabbed Peter and started attacking him, but for the most part he was trying to cling on, not let Peter out of his grip... He was *trying* to bring Peter here. But *why*? Why did he have to bring Peter to this reality? *That* part doesn't make sense to him. He had a spacial jump, so why not just bring Peter somewhere else? Was he trying to prove that his tech works, using Peter, so Tony would have to listen to him?

He feels like trying to understand this man's motivations is only going to hurt his head, and he's way too overwhelmed for thinking right now.

"You need some sleep before using that big brain of yours. Preferably a normal amount, but I won't snitch."

Tony says that all the time, even though the man never takes his own advice. Peter thinks it's a little hypocritical because of that, but it's not like he can win that argument. Tony is probably up right now-

Peter feels like he's just taken a shot to the heart. Tony and Pepper are probably *so* worried right now.

He can't imagine what it must be like for them. He's feeling lost right now, but at least he has more information about what happened. If they don't know what had happened, it probably looks *so* bad right now. They might think Peter is dead. Or lost in their world, somewhere where he can't reach them. Or- Or...

Or a *lot* of things. They have nothing to go on. Tony *hates* that.

... Tony had been scared.

Peter had never seen him *that* terrified before, not even when he had rescued Peter from that lab. When he missed Peter's hand and only grabbed ash, he thought he saw a heartbreak in

Tony's face.

Oh, god, Tony's *heart*.

What if something goes wrong? The arc reactor- that stable humming that Peter clings to at night to make sure Tony is alive down the hall- what if Tony freaks out so bad that it can't help him? What if Peter gets back only to find out that the stress killed him? It would be all his fault.

Again.

Just like Aunt May, you remember. You killed her, it was your fault.

"I didn't know she was sick." Peter hisses at himself, pushing the notebook out of reach. The papers flutter and crinkle where he threw it, the pen skittering towards the crack in the wood around him.

There's that evil voice in his head again, telling Peter his worst fears, as if he wasn't aware of it all on his own. He takes a deep breath and tries to relax, just like his therapist said to. In for four, hold for four...

"I didn't *know* she was sick. Her heart would have gave out at some point. It wasn't my fault. I was just a kid." Peter tells himself aloud, listening to the dark around him.

He sat in the dark like this the day that Aunt May died.

Peter had been so excited for that day. Ben was away but was trying to get there that night. May brought him to the fair, the two of them having more snacks than Peter thought they could afford, going on rides together, running around under the sun. May had been having a hard week, so seeing her smile and laugh made Peter only want to make it happen more. He kept trying to be silly, feeling like a flower reaching towards the sky when she smiled at him.

Everything had been so perfect, so *nice*. Until he had accidentally let go of May's hand when they passed by the parade.

He was distracted by the balloons in the sky, and then someone bumped his shoulder and the crowd swept him up. Peter got scared and he ducked into an alley, stayed there in sight of the sidewalk but out of reach. He pressed himself up against the wall and put his head in his knees, waiting. Because Aunt May always told him that if he gets lost, he needs to stay in one spot, and she'd come find him.

But it kept getting darker, and the parade ended. It wasn't until the cold set in and he was shivering that Peter knew *something* was wrong. But still, he sat there for hours just like he was told to do.

He didn't know she died until Uncle Ben found him, after hours of the police and a search party looking for him. She collapsed in the street before she could tell anyone she lost him, and Uncle Ben was at a fireman's recruiting event, so he didn't get the call until he was back in an area with cell service. Uncle Ben had been the one to find him.

He was just around the corner from where she died.

“It wasn’t my fault. The stress didn’t kill her.” Peter murmurs, staring at his shoes and hugging his knees tight to his chest. He feels small again. Waiting for someone to come get him, but knowing that this time he shouldn’t wait.

“Tony won’t have a heart attack.” Peter assures himself. “It’s just me.”

Right. It’s just Peter that was lost. He isn’t Tony’s real son, he’s just a student. Sure, the man cares about Peter, and Peter trusts him more than anything. He knows that Tony will come looking for him. But surely, his heart wouldn’t give out for a student.

“That’s right. Everything will be okay. Tony will know what to do.”

-

Tony thinks he might be dying. He isn’t sure.

He isn’t a superstitious man. He doesn’t believe in heaven, not anymore. He was always iffy about it when he was a kid, too. He doesn’t believe in good luck or bad- he just believes the world is what it is. He always tells Peter that “Parker Luck” isn’t real, that he isn’t cursed, and that bad things happen but it’s important to move on from that.

Hell, he would tell other people too, even the religious ones, what he thinks. He didn’t care if someone thought he was abnormal, or sacrilegious, or whatever word-of-the-day they could pin on him. Life is easier when he isn’t battling to understand the whims of made up gods or concepts.

But when he watched Peter at breakfast that morning, he thought he felt something wrong, like a gut feeling.

He had felt it before. He would excuse it because he knew what a “gut feeling” really was: his mind collecting information and knowing that he was close to a realization that he wasn’t paying attention to. When he met Peter, all of the signs were there, laid out in front of him, and Peter was a puzzle that he figured out.

The kid was obviously from a bad neighborhood, pretty poor. He talked about a mother that he lived with that wasn’t around often. He and the others were investigating Queens at the time for a string of missing kid cases that were causing alarm. And if the kids did turn up, they were dead before they reached the hospital. When Steve and Bucky first met Peter, he was another face among those kids that were potential targets, and then he turned out to be a brilliant little shit. Annoyingly so.

It was good information, coming from Peter who knew Queens well. They asked about his friends, and Peter even mentioned kids going missing that they hadn’t gotten reports on. But what started as a way to get information (and he says this loosely, because he knew damn well that Peter was going to get into a good school and still be around to learn from Bruce and Tony either way), ended up with Tony getting attached.

Tony tried not to admit it, but Peter was an infectious thing. He was fascinating to figure out, but Tony grew fond of his rambling and his energy.

Peter is a bad liar. Tony knew for a long time that Peter was probably more alone than he let on, if his mother was even real. Tony had that gut feeling and he *knew* it was his mind connecting dots about Peter's life. The signs that he was abused at some point in his life or recently, signs that he wasn't being taken care of.

Tony *knew* when Peter was kidnapped. But he didn't believe in that sort of thing. Not until he was struck by it again.

That feeling, it had lingered when Pepper kissed Peter's hair before she left for work. It stuck around when Tony ruffled his hair, a promise to meet him at the lab after school. It stayed when he watched Peter walk away, a sleepy smile on his face.

And Tony, he stood there for a few minutes, staring at the elevator where Peter had left, something sinking in. That feeling that Tony had before, that had led to the worst few days of Tony's life where he searched for Peter and begged that he'd be okay.

Something was wrong. Again.

It almost feels like how Peter tells Tony his spider-sense works. Something nagging at him that he needs to be careful, whispering in his ear that he needs to watch out. But for what?

What could be wrong?

What was he missing?

What dots hadn't connected yet?

Tony never knew what parents meant, when they told people that they could feel when something was wrong with their kid. His father wasn't like that in any sense of the word, and Tony thought it was just something that parents told themselves in order to feel better.

But FRIDAY confirmed it.

"Boss, Parker's phone just signaled an SOS alert."

Time felt slow. *He* was moving too slow. Or maybe the enemy was moving too fast.

Tony was out the door in seconds- he's reviewed the footage for hours, unable to look away from the screens and see an empty space next to him where Peter is supposed to be. Peter and this villain were gone in less than a minute from the start of their interaction.

A minute. That's all it took, and Tony would laugh if the stress wasn't slowly killing him. Time had worked against him.

He asked himself if he could have been faster. He asked himself if one minute was too slow, and the answer is yes. It's his fault.

Tony saw his kid turning into dust in the air, and heard the crack in his voice, knew that he was in pain and there was nothing Tony could do to stop it. The kid's voice keeps replaying in his mind. Every time he blinked, Peter's face was there, his hand gone before Tony could grab him.

When Tony took Peter in, he swore that the kid would not be hurt the way he was before. There was no way he could stop Peter from being Spider-Man, not unless he locked the kid away in a high security facility, and that was no way for Peter to live. But Tony could train him, could *teach* him, the way he should have been taught. Peter wouldn't have to worry about being anything but the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, but he *could* be trained to deal with anything that comes his way.

The kid had done everything right, just like he was taught. He refused to talk to the man that approached him, and when he started attacking, Peter *fought*. Tony could see a technique that Natasha had burned into Peter's mind to get out of someone's hold. He saw Peter throw a punch the way Bucky taught him to. He wasn't going down easy, and Tony can't be more proud of him for that. They struggled and Peter managed to get a good few hits in.

The problem is that the man that attacked Peter has to *also* be enhanced. No one else would have lasted against a hit that hard from Peter, and no one else would have managed to get past Peter's reflexes and be able to grab him.

Peter had done everything right. It was Tony that messed up.

He couldn't reach them in time. He hadn't grabbed Peter in time, because Peter disappeared in mere *seconds*, and he has to keep telling himself that. Less than a minute, that was how long it took for Peter to go from standing outside the Tower to falling through the sky above the harbor.

But Tony just wasn't fast enough. That was the problem. It *is* his fault, and he can't forgive himself for this. How can he, when he had that feeling before Peter even left? He *knew* that something was wrong. Why did he *ever* let Peter walk out that door? He broke the promises that he made to himself and the promise he made to Peter, to always be there for him.

"You need to eat something, tin man." Natasha slaps a plate down on the table next to him. Tony pushes it away, the plate sliding down the table and landing at the edge, almost tipping over.

"Get out of my face." He states too harshly, and inwardly he feels like a dickhead for that, but that's nothing new.

"You going to yell at me like you did with everyone else?"

"I said get out!" Tony stands from the table, the stool clanging against the tile. Natasha catches it in a smooth motion before it can clatter to the floor, putting it back upright with an ease that manages to piss Tony off just the same.

"I assume that's a yes."

"Have you found him?" Tony rounds on her- because God, if she's going to stick around to annoy him, she had better deal with his anger. Natasha's cool gaze sends spikes through his nerves, the anger flickering. She's figuring him out with just a single glance, and he *hates* that. She sighs after a moment, setting the stool down on the ground. "Have any of you found him? Anything?"

"No."

"Then I don't want to hear it." Tony waves her away, and before she can protest, he feels the anger swell. "I don't want to hear it! I don't want to hear anything, if it isn't that my son isn't *dead!*"

"You won't chase me out," Natasha warns, taking Tony's previous seat. She relaxes against the counter, tapping her finger idly. "And you know, if you shout like that, your heart is going to give out again."

"To hell with my heart, it doesn't matter."

"Peter wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

Tony fumes silently, pacing along the floor like a caged animal. He *feels* like a caged animal. He's been cooped up in this room waiting for something, anything, and he keeps lashing out at anyone who dares to enter the room. Icicle Man had something thrown at him, Tony doesn't remember. He keeps looking out the window, the damn spot where Peter had disappeared *mocking him* as he looks out at it.

He knows she's right, of course. They're all right, that's what's so frustrating. He had nearly fallen out of the sky when Peter was gone, his heart sputtering, that fluttering and dangerous feeling before growing tight like a vice in his chest. Peter had admitted once that the steady thrum of the arc reactor eased some of his worry. He could hear it, that constant humming that told Peter that if something happened, it would keep him safe.

It had worked that time, but Tony had come a little too close to persistent problems over these two days.

Two days, where nothing is found. Not a trace of Peter other than the kid's phone on a rooftop. But what would they have found? A *body*?

No, he refuses to go there. He is not allowed to *grieve*, because that is ridiculous. Peter *isn't* dead. He can't be- he *won't* be dead. Tony would know. He isn't a superstitious man, but he thinks he understands now what it means when parents say, "*I know when something is wrong.*"

He would know. If Peter had died, he would know.

But then, pray tell, *where the fuck* is his kid? He's not in the the sea, he's not in the sky. He's not in the streets of New York, and no one has heard of anything outside of the area. Peter would have called by now, he's *such* a good kid, despite also being a little shit that eats all of his food and has the mentality of a deaf puppy that is dead set on learning how to swim

without help. He would have called Tony immediately, and if that didn't work, he would call Pepper, Rhodey, or Happy.

Their phones didn't ring, and if they did, Peter was not on the other line.

"I know," He finally says, biting down the mean, nasty things he wants to say. Because he knows they're looking, and he can't blame them. It's his own damn fault he can't be out searching. His heart is too unstable for Tony to take risks, and Pepper begged him to get rest.

"You need to eat something, and you need to *sleep*. Pacing this room is only going to drive you crazy." Natasha reminds him, grabbing the plate and setting it in Tony's view again. It's a cheap microwave pasta, as if she knows Tony can't stomach to eat anything good until Peter is safe.

"Well, that's just it. I already *feel* crazy, Nat." Tony runs a hand through his hair. The hand that had gripped onto air and ash. "I feel like- Like a part of me is just *missing*. Gone. I just-" Tony takes a moment to breathe, to remind himself that Peter is probably fine. Probably. "I lost the kid."

"We'll get him back." She promises. Natasha doesn't promise easily.

Tony can see it, in the corner of his eye. The red underneath the light, the one part of the room he can't bear to look at. Natasha can, however. She leans her head on her hands to stare at it.

"Did he know?"

Tony's voice feels choked. "It was gonna be a surprise."

A surprise. Peter was going to get it today. A new suit, one that Tony swore would keep him safe.

Peter had designed it a long time ago, and Tony kept everything that he could, only adding what was necessary. It wasn't the suit he *wanted* to give Peter, the Iron Spider, which he was sure would keep him safe. But this one was that beginning, that small branch into the topic.

It doesn't feel right, without Peter here to see it.

"He'll love it." Natasha tells him. "Because you made it for him. When he gets back, maybe don't show him this for a while. He'll ignore everything we say and beg to test it out immediately and give us all some more heart attacks."

Future tense. She still thinks they'll find him.

Maybe Nat has enough history with crazy to understand him right now. She doesn't even bend under his anger, under his worry and his fear. Maybe she only does it for Peter, as they had never been close like that before. Or because Pepper couldn't be here while they deal with the legal trouble (of Peter going *missing*, *his kid is gone*), and the two of them get along.

Tony thinks he might be dying. But he isn't sure.

-

His emergency funds (a whopping \$400, hidden inside of a clip that looks like a sheet of paper) has come in handy a few times since Peter got here.

It's been four days since the unplanned dimensional travel. Peter is choosing to believe that this is a good thing, somehow, and that he isn't feeling sick about it or like he wants to tear his hair out and start biting his nails.

Gotham is an unusual place, different from Queens in most ways. But at its heart, a city is a city, and Peter knows the ins and outs better than most people do. Gotham sleeps during the day, and is much more active at night, depending on the district. Because of this, he uses the daytime to roam around (avoiding suspicious adults, which are most of them, if not all) and get a lay of the land. There's less crowding in the night districts during this time, and that is where he suspects the man that attacked him might be hanging around, if he's still here.

Daytime is reserved for mapping the streets into his memory, finding hidey holes and shortcuts, getting a sense for the dynamics between those in the daylight and those that wake when the sun goes down. When night falls, Peter is much more like Spider-Man, if not quite him yet. Scratch that- he might be more "Parker" than he is Spider-Man.

Parker knew the streets of Queens like he knew the back of his hand. Nothing could slip past him, he had friends in a *lot* of places. Parker is the same now, listening and weeding his way into becoming a face people know. He needs to know Gotham and the way she breathes the way he knew Queens. He waits for his spider-sense to act up while getting information about the people and the city.

Because if Peter can become a trusted face like before, Peter will get more information out of people than he would by just eavesdropping. And maybe, someone will be able to tell him what his spider-sense might not find: the hole that the man who dragged him here could be hiding in.

But so far, four days of nothing. It's just him wandering around day and night, logging his suspicions, theories, etc into his notebook, and figuring out Gotham itself.

He had to get new clothes, so that was a good \$50 down the drain at a cheap clothing store. He got a jacket, new underwear, and another pair of pants. He washes everything not currently on him at the laundry mat a block away from his water silo, which has become his temporary base. He figures if he *does* see Nightwing again, the guy won't get on his case as much if Peter doesn't look like he only has one outfit.

And it's starting to feel like *when* he sees Nightwing again, not if, because Peter has seen glimpses of the other vigilantes these last few days. As it turns out, he's not the only one that roams Gotham at night.

Signal is the daytime vigilante, appearing in the street more often than the others. He's pretty cool, from what Peter can tell. And, a *meta*, which was surprising. At least, he *thinks* Signal is a meta. Peter had only gotten to see the tail end of a fight, but there was flashes of gold light that didn't come from the people that Signal was saving. Peter can't tell if that's a good

thing or not- would Batman trust Spider-Man, like he apparently trusts Signal? He decided to leave that question for now, because maybe Signal just got special permission or something.

And last night, he had seen Spoiler and Red Robin. He saw the flash of Spoiler's suit hopping over the alley he was in, and later in the night he saw Red Robin swinging towards a burning building. Peter wonders if he's *supposed* to be seeing them...

Because he *knows* he isn't supposed to be seeing Batman.

Gotham has a lot to say about their hero. And Peter has been listening intently. The vigilante lurks in the shadows of Gotham, waiting to strike at a moment's notice. And he's *good* at it, Peter has been paying attention to the rumors that fly around. What Gotham lacks for online information, it makes up for in the talk of the streets. Batman is the lurker, the Dark Knight that owns the shadows. It's his *thing*, which Peter can appreciate. Spider-Man also blends in to the night, creeping around until it's time to strike. Peter almost feels bad about ruining whatever this guy is trying to do. Because the problem is, the guy never really stood a chance against his spider-senses.

Half the time, Peter forgets he *isn't* supposed to know someone is there and tracking him. No matter if it's the dead of night, in a poorly lit area, or not. Peter looks up, and then has to pretend he was just looking around in general. He can always hear the small moment where Batman wonders if Peter saw him, where his heart stutters, or the man goes eerily still, barely even breathing.

Which is probably creepy of Peter. (He gets that a lot- that he's kinda creepy. He sometimes makes sure to be extra spidery around Sam and Rhodey, because they always make a comment. It amuses him to hear "*That can't be natural.*") But if he's being stalked- and he suspects he is- then he thinks it's only fair that he lets himself scare the big bad Batman.

Peter hides in the city. It's easy for him to slip away, to sink into shadows, and *not* be heard. He just has the advantage over them, being able to hear, smell, and see where they are. He loses Batman more than a few times, sometimes leading the man towards muggings or street fights just to get the man to focus on that instead of Peter. He does the same to Red Robin, who follows Peter as well. The two of them seem to be taking shifts, but last night, they were both on his case.

He's being stalked.

But the question is: *why*?

They can't suspect that he's Spider-Man, because *he* hasn't even shown up yet! Why stalk regular, ordinary Peter Parker? It's not like they do it during the daytime, either, it's almost always at evening and night, when they're supposed to be out patrolling for danger and shit like that. They shouldn't suspect him of anything besides it being weird that Peter walks around at night.

Unless this is about those bruises. Is it seriously because of that *one* interaction with Nightwing, though? Peter struggles to think that they'd care about *one* kid in a city *this* bad- there are hundreds, if not thousands, of kids just like Peter, or worse off than him. They

should be focusing on that, it's not like Peter is in current danger. So, are they good guys, or do they think Peter is up to something?

He *wants* to trust them, if he's being honest. But he has never willingly trusted any adults until Tony nearly killed himself proving his worth to Peter. Even now, with therapy, he skirts around authority figures and hides details- stores away anything they could use as fuel against him, like he used to store away his food. Tony and Pepper are patient with him (or as patient as Tony can be), and his mentors try their best too, but... Those are adults that Peter knows and works with. Again, Peter doesn't know *these* adults. How can he trust them without knowing them like he knows the Avengers?

At least next time he sees one of them, he'll be free of the bruises on his neck. They were done healing when he woke up on day two. If that is the case, then they'll likely leave him alone if he asserts that he's fine, and he's not in danger. If they keep coming around, they're either annoyingly going to try and keep helping him, which will prove that Peter could likely trust them, or it's because they think Peter is trouble, or could lead them to it.

Peter bites into his burger and tries not to frown. (The food here is delicious, and he wouldn't want the owner to think he's dissatisfied.)

He's at the burger joint he's taken up as his new spot- he found it day one and he got hooked almost instantly. The burgers remind him of Tony, and that's what he needs right now. He uses it to get into the mindset of his mentor, tries to think like Tony would (even if he's not supposed to). If he just knew *why* the Bats were stalking him, he could try to assuage their fears or suspicions. He could figure out what they want, and in turn, figure out what *he* wants from them.

He shakes his head clear of the thought for now. He should focus instead on his comms. He's been wanting to fix it in case Tony or someone else ends up here like him. Though, their comm might end up broken too, and that would defeat the purpose of fixing it. But if it's Tony that comes, the comm would be a good idea.

The comm in question doesn't *look* broken. Peter fiddles with it in between burger bites, detaching the bottom compartment to get a look at the wires inside. Nothing is out of place or wonky, so he has to assume that it was the jump between dimensions that caused the issue. Which means it isn't likely that he'll get them working again...

Maybe instead, Peter should just make it again? He could change it out and replicate it almost exactly using the same parts, like it would be brand new. He could keep it on the same frequency or search through them, and if Tony ends up here, he would likely do the same.

...!see it hear that see it?...

Peter lifts his gaze and squints towards the door. From the back of the restaurant, he can barely see the door, but he can hear the bell ring as it opens and the shifting of feet. Someone with shoes that are falling apart based on the squeaking, and another with a more expensive sneaker that might be brand new- probably stolen, based on the fact that Peter saw a shoe store got robbed yesterday in this area. And a smell hits his nose, all too familiar to him. Gunpowder from an already fired gun. There's the clinking of bullets inside the case.

Ah, shit.

The owner moves inside the kitchen, unaware to the bell. The man has a bad ear from his age, and he's going blind in one eye. Peter had grown attached to this place quickly, and thus grown attached to the grumpy old man. He just grunts when Peter orders food, but he gives extra fries when he thinks Peter won't notice. It's perfect. Everyone knows that cheery people don't make good food unless they're grandparents.

He knows this place isn't on the best terms money-wise right now. Every time he comes, he's the only customer, and Peter doesn't see many people inside when he passes by during the day.

Peter is just Peter right now... but he can't let that stop him from helping someone.

He shifts out of the booth (begging for his burger to still be fine when he comes back), and chooses to stay low as his ears perk to listen. Their whispers hiss back and forth- two people. Easy work.

"Just grab the money now."

"He needs to open the register, idiot!"

Peter raises a brow. One of them is new to this, or is just dumb.

He sneaks along the side of the counter, peeking around the corner. The two men contrast each other. One is lanky with a big puffer jacket, the other is short, a little stubby, and thin clothes. The shorter one has the new sneakers, the other with a pair that are duct taped. Both are jumpy; Peter can hear the erratic shots of their hearts. Lanky guy's eyes dart around from the register to the door, eager to get it over with.

Peter narrows his eyes, smelling the gun and spotting the lump inside a jacket pocket, where their hands are. They'll just raise their hand and wave the gun around inside the jacket, scare the man into opening the register.

They might be out of their depth here. The owner might have the disadvantage of being old, but the dude has definitely seen the brunt of it in his life time. He has scars on his knuckles from repeated fighting, and a tattoo on his forearm of a double barrel shotgun. Peter can even smell the guns the owner keeps for protection underneath that very register.

But still, this is *his* job.

Peter hops over the counter when they turn towards the kitchen window and try to spot the owner. He crawls up to the register just out of their peripherals, then pops up behind it, calling out in a semi-cheery voice. "Welcome to Benny's, can I take your order?"

Both of the men jump, spinning back to face Peter with wide eyes. "When did you-"

"I've been here."

“No you weren’t!” The lanky man protests, eyes darting between Peter and the register. His pupils are blown out wide, swallowing a lump in his throat. He’s scared- he’s new to this, somehow. Probably not from Gotham. His accent doesn’t sound like it. “Kid, you’re like, 12 years old, we *know* you don’t work here.”

“Sir, I’m supposed to clock out in fifteen minutes. If you could please just let me take your order, that would be great.” Peter leans against the register with a sigh. “Overtime, am I right?”

“What?”

Shoot. He thought he sounded older. Whatever.

The other man lifts his hand, pressing the barrel of the gun against Peter’s forehead through the jacket fabric, letting Peter know there’s *really* a gun, though Peter already knows that. “I don’t want to hurt you, kid. Give us the money in the register and we walk out, no harm done.”

“I don’t have the money.” Peter replies, looking past the gunman and at his friend.

The gunman scowls. “Open the register.”

“I don’t work here. Who told you I work here? I’m a kid.”

Anger flashes across his face, and he raises the gun. Peter catches his wrist as the hand swings down to hit him. He slams his arm down against the counter, the man dropping the gun as his wrist gives out a *crack!* Peter slips the gun out of the man’s jacket pocket as the other man raises his own gun at Peter.

“Stop!” Lanky shouts at him, his hands trembling.

Peter holds his hands up in ‘surrender’, observing the man carefully. *smell it, see it? hear it, not there!* His spider senses whisper to him. *New*, it says, agreeing with Peter. His voice shakes too much to sound threatening. And besides... Peter can *smell* the difference between these two guns.

“I’ll- I’ll shoot you if you don’t drop that.” He gestures to the other gun in Peter’s hand. The man with the broken wrist groans, hissing under his breath as he backs away from the counter.

“Damn kid broke my fucking wrist!”

You kinda deserved it.

“Then shoot me.”

A heavy silence follows, sitting in the air like a gunshot. The gunman’s breath shakes, licking his lips nervously as he brandishes the gun at Peter. “I’m being serious!”

“Shoot me.” Peter repeats. “...Unless you *can’t*.”

“I-I...” Lanky glances at his friend, boss, whatever the other is to him. “I-”

“Don’t have any bullets? At least *one* of you cares about gun safety.” Peter lowers his hands, clicking on the safety for the gun he’s holding. Broken Wrist looks up at his friend to see what he’s gonna do- some punk kid is acting like he’s the boss here, so why *wouldn’t* his friend shoot Peter? Asshole.

Well, because Peter’s right, of course. There’s not a single bullet in this guy’s gun.

“What are you waiting for?” Broken Wrist demands. Lanky’s arm lowers, his face growing paler as he gawks at Peter. “Shoot him, idiot!”

“I-I can’t.” Lanky admits. “I-”

Broken Wrist snatches the gun out of Lanky’s hand. With his non-dominant hand, he points at Peter and shoots.

Nothing happens, save for the click of the trigger. Peter has half a mind to flinch anyway, if only for the bad memory of the first time a gun was pointed at him. The man tries to shoot again, only for nothing to happen once more.

“Get out of here, and don’t come back.” Peter raises the gun he got off Broken Wrist- trying not to hurl upon using it, but he’s not intimidating otherwise. “Get out!”

It takes Peter’s second shout for the men to get the hint. They scramble backwards out of the door, the bell clanging as it opens and shuts. Peter sets the gun on the counter, pushing it away from himself with a nausea overwhelming him. The safety was on, but they hadn’t even noticed. Gotham seriously has a problem with idiot criminals.

His only regret is that he can’t call the police. This close to Crime Alley, the cops are running corrupt... Which isn’t all that different to how cops usually are. And he can’t give a statement, because he *doesn’t exist*.

“What the hell was that.”

Peter jumps, turning to face Benny. The old man had hobbled in on his bad leg, leaning against the door from the kitchen and staring at Peter as if he’d grown two heads. Actually no, he looks more pissed off than he does surprised. But it’s definitely there, the shock. Peter knows the face well. He ducks down to look away from Benny, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Um...”

“You *broke* his wrist?”

“Self defense classes...” Peter mutters. He knows he doesn’t look that strong, and everyone always thinks he’s younger than he is.

“Are you *stupid*?” Benny hobbles closer, taking the gun away from Peter’s reach. He pulls out a box from underneath the counter, dropping the gun inside with a dozen other guns, all

apparently confiscated. “I could have handled them.”

“But you didn’t have to.” Peter retorts, looking the older man in the eye. “If I can help and I didn’t, then it would have been my fault if you had gotten hurt.”

Benny falls silent, and Peter wishes not for the first time that one of his powers was mind reading. The old man taps his fingers on the counter, eyes narrowed at Peter in intense thought. Is he mad at Peter? It would have sucked if he had to clean up if Peter got shot. But it doesn’t feel like anger, even if his face looks it.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but that attitude in Gotham is gonna get you killed, Moron.” Benny finally tells him. Peter doesn’t doubt that. But he’s also *not* just a scrawny kid. “You can’t do that again.”

“I’m definitely gonna do it again.” Peter says honestly, without thinking.

Benny grunts impatiently, shaking his head and running a hand over his face. “...Now you have me feeling bad.”

“What? Why?” That was most certainly not his intention here. He didn’t expect a thanks or anything, because Peter never does. But he also didn’t expect him to be feeling bad.

“I’m *worrying* about you now, do you see how that’s a problem?”

“No, not- Not really? Kind of, I guess?” Peter squints. He feels like he had this exact conversation before. Who was that with? Wasn’t it-

Biggie! It was *Biggie*, the owner of Dugout.

That was a while ago, when Peter was first on the streets. After letting his missing person’s case cool down, Peter started up a ‘fixing things’ business. He would go around a lot of stores and homes and ask about fixing anything for them. Eventually he got to the point where people knew how to find him and get him somewhere where there was something needing fixing- a fridge, a door, whatever. He had a good reputation.

Biggie had been a customer of his, he owned a place called ‘The Dugout.’ On his first job, he was fixing a TV that had fallen off of the wall when a customer started getting violent and belligerent. Peter basically tricked the guy into walking outside the restaurant and locking him out. After that, Biggie started calling him around more, after telling Peter, “*Now I’m worried about you. You have no self preservation instincts or something.*” Biggie would make things up for Peter to fix, and then feed Peter on top of paying him for helping out.

Wait, Biggie kind of... looks like Benny. Or does Benny look like Biggie? Except, Biggie wasn’t as old- he’s not young, but Benny is up there in age.

“There’s a room upstairs you can take.” Benny’s words snap Peter out of his thoughts.

“Huh?” Peter shakes his head, taking a step back. “Wait- I don’t-”

“Don’t try that whole ‘*I’m not homeless*’ thing on me, New York. It’s not an uncommon problem here in Gotham, and no one is gonna judge you for it. So I’m cutting to the chase.” Benny points at Peter, and he gulps nervously. “As long as you don’t bring in drugs, and you try to keep trouble from the apartment, then you can stay upstairs. There’s a room up there that I let people stay in.”

...good!...

Peter relaxes his shoulders somewhat. Nothing is coming up as a threat to him, so he thinks Benny is being truthful. At least, he has good intentions.

And wow. It isn’t until Peter thought of getting a real bed that he realizes how *little* he wants to sleep on a rooftop again. Maybe he had gotten complacent while living with Tony, but having a room to sleep in really changes a perspective.

“If- If you’re sure-”

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t.” Benny grunts back shortly. “Go sit down, I’ll show you the room later.”

“Yes sir!” He salutes (because Benny feels like a man he should be saluting to. Isn’t that what people do for veterans? Benny has a medal on the wall that looks like he might be a veteran.) and Benny closes his eyes as if begging for patience.

Peter is halfway through turning around to get out of Benny’s sight when he hears a gruff:

“And thanks.”

He stops mid step, foot hanging in the air, and looks at Benny. Really studies him, because Peter hadn’t done much of that yet. He has his hands on his hips, trying to look all tough, and again, Peter is struck by the similarity between Benny and Biggie. Tough guys who are actually really good people, always looking out for others. He grins up at the old man, who raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “Don’t mention it.”

Peter hears another sigh as he hops over the counter and makes his way back to his burger. He has a comm to remake, a frequency to settle on, and plans to work out. He also has to figure out what he’s going to do about those Bats that keep following him around...

birds singing flying around

Chapter Summary

“W-Where’s your hall pass?”

“Where’s yours?” Peter fires back.

“It’s right here.” The coffee guy digs into his pocket (with much difficulty) and pulls out a slip of paper. Peter raises a brow.

“That’s a coupon.”

Coffee looks at his hand, shocked at what he’s holding. He must not have expected Peter to notice.

Chapter Notes

...Hey y'all!

So, holy crap? First of all, we both want to say a HUGE thank you to everyone and the love y'all have given us and this fic on both tiktok and on here. It is so, so, so appreciated and it makes us feel cool and stuff. We had hoped people would enjoy it, but to find so many of you?? Thank you, sincerely. Just a heads up- this chapter is exactly 29,000 words! I won't make this a long a/n, so I'll save the other stuff for end notes.-
Erin

Hi everyone, aligherwood here! I just want to thank you all for the absolute amazing support! Erin deserves all the love, and going insane with them over every new comment or hit goal has been the highlight of my week! Thank you all sm again!! I hope you all love the chapter (it's one of my favorites because my favorite character is an absolute loser in it <3)

trigger warnings: anxiety attack that leads towards a panic attack, talk of death, grief, and loss (that should be a given, but just in case), and gun and knife violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dick thinks that they might have to intervene and make Tim get some rest. Which isn't an unusual situation for them. Tim *never* gets enough rest, and they're all sure the kid's blood is *made* of coffee at this point. The only thing stopping him from putting Redbull in instead of

water when he brews him fifth mug of the day is a lingering threat from Alfred and Bruce that Dick is not supposed to be aware of.

Sometimes, this problem is the complete opposite. When the kid actually *does* fall asleep, he *stays* asleep. No matter if he's at the Manor, his own apartment, in the car, on a roller coaster, or a submarine. If he feels like he's safe, his body is going to catch up on the days of sleep he missed whether he likes it or not.

This is one of those times where Dick might need help getting Tim away from the screen. Because his stubborn streak can rival his body's natural processes, and Tim is refusing to go anywhere until he cracks their newest puzzle.

"Nothing, nowhere," He mutters (not for the first time) under his breath. One hand is twisted in his hair with his pointer finger tapping away in thought, his eyes flicking between two of four screens. They go back and forth like a Kit-Cat Klock, and Dick imagines his brain is ticking just like one. *Tick tock tick tock tick tock...* It makes Tim look a little manic, which isn't helping his case that he needs to get to bed, and soon.

Of course, because Tim is stubborn, Dick is going to have to do more than recognize the signs.

"How is this even possible?" *Tick tock* goes Tim's eyes.

"When did you last sleep?"

Dick is ignored. As usual.

Tim's hand removes from his hair (the place where he had been keeping it now has the hair sticking up) and he bites at his nails, leaning back in his seat to get a view of all four screens. *Tick tock*. Dick leans on the desk, crossing his arms and mentally preparing himself for having to wrestle Tim into taking a nap, at the very least. Last time, he almost lost a finger during the struggle. It's not happening again if he can help it.

"He's not listed anywhere. Not on any school records in Queens, or New York at *all*. No medical records that match his description that go anywhere, no neighborhood or community posts talking about a kid who's gone missing in the last five years. No digital footprint so far, no family records, no immigration or travel records, no *legal* record that this kid *exists*." Tim rants, but it's mostly to himself. "It's like he just popped out of the sky and started wandering around Gotham. Babs has records of him walking around during the daytime, pretty much everywhere, with no destination in mind. And then at night, we lose him when he starts doing the exact same thing and then!" Tim laughs, clapping his hands together. "Then, he disappears! No one can find him until he pops up again the next day!"

"*Tim*, have you slept?" He asks more urgently. Once again, he's ignored.

It's not like Dick isn't worried, or paying attention to what Tim is saying. He learned his lesson multiple times to not ignore Tim. But this is not news, not anymore. It had been when Babs first got on Peter's case, that very first night. But it's been four days, and all Dick has heard from them is this exact thing.

Peter is untraceable. It really is like he fell out of the sky one day.

They couldn't find him in the foster system, so they moved on to searching through schools in New York, starting with the top-listed schools that kids could get scholarships to go to, and then further down. Peter is likely smart enough to earn a scholarship like that, if he's half as good at hacking as Babs thinks he is. They followed any rabbit hole they thought might lead to something: a Peter at a school called Topside that was in foster-care? Turned out to be a 17 year old that looks nothing like him. There was a girl who tagged a Peter for an debate club picture, but it was just a nickname for a girl friend of hers. That had led them to going through schools with far less opportunities, but nothing there either. Babs and Tim have been using an algorithm to pick up any similarities between Peter and their files, but nothing comes back that is of any worth.

Even B is stumped, when he manages to get time to help. That doesn't sound like the Batman he knows. Dick didn't think that this 14 year old would end up causing such a ruckus in the Batcave. Bruce and Tim may have been stalking Peter these last couple of nights, but that's while waiting for a break on Two-Face's whereabouts or uncovering how they got out of Arkham this time. Bruce is more focused on that than he is Peter, so Peter is more of a project for the rest of them, that can spare the time.

Except every turn they take just leads them back to nothing. Which worries them *more*.

Because it's starting to sound like the kid is in some serious danger, if he doesn't even exist. He almost considered witness protection, but that would involve creating a fake life of some kind. This kid has *none*. It doesn't spell out anything nice, and leans more towards the possibility they had been praying wouldn't be the case: human trafficking. Peter might not even be his real name.

"I think this Peter kid is breaking his brain." Steph calls from the other side of the Batcave. She's lazily spinning in a chair, shooting rubber bands at a stalactite.

"Because *how!*? *How* is he doing this?" Tim, who apparently *was* listening, whirls around to speak directly to her. His hands flail around as he talks. Steph ignores the outburst, sticking her tongue out as she aims her next rubber band. "I swear, it's like he knows I'm there! He looked at me! He looked at B! Do you know how insane that is? Do we all understand that? It's impossible to find a hiding Batman, and yet this kid always manages to look directly where B is."

Dick frowns smally, recalling the same thing had happened to him, when he first met Peter. It was like Peter had sensed him nearby, and Dick swore the kid made eye contact with him.

"Maybe he's *really* sensitive to people looking at him." Steph figures, aiming a rubber band at a stalactite above Bruce, who doesn't even flinch when they land on his desk. He continues reading whatever it is that has him so preoccupied. Ah, from what Dick can see, Gordon had left more emails in Bruce's inbox than there was yesterday. Looks like something about Two-Face. Is that why Stephanie is here? With Killer Croc and a Firefly out, it would make sense that Stephanie gets assigned his case. Maybe Tim or Damian will be working with her.

"He knows when *Bruce* is watching him, Steph!"

“*Really*, really sensitive.”

“Tim, you should sleep.” Dick tries again. He’s ignored again.

“It bothers me that I can’t even find a picture of him anywhere.” Tim glares at the top monitor above his head, which is searching through the police database on missing kid reports, potential human trafficking cases, and social medias from New Yorkers. “All I get are look-alikes. Maybe I need to go farther back than five years.”

Tim holds back a yawn, attempting to cover his mouth with one hand. He reaches for his coffee, but Dick places his hand over the top of the cup. The glare that was reserved for the computer is sent his direction instead, but Dick holds a stern gaze. It’s been three days now with Tim not getting more than three hours.

“Sleep. Now.”

“I don’t need sleep, I need *answers*.” Tim stands his ground.

“You *do* need to study.” Steph points out. Another rubber band lands on Bruce’s head. This time, the man looks down at his desk, sees the rubber bands, looks above him, then sighs when Stephanie shoots another. He returns to his work as if nothing happened, and Steph gives a wicked satisfied grin. “Don’t you and Duke have an exam coming up?”

“Who cares about that?” Tim waves it off.

And yep, that’s it.

Bruce and Dick had to fight tooth and nail to get Tim back into school rather than keeping up the CEO thing. Not that Tim couldn’t very well handle it- but Dick owed it to Tim to take care of him, after what happened when Bruce “died.” Tim deserves his senior year of high school, he deserves getting a graduation day with everyone in the family there to celebrate. He and Duke are in the same class now, and Tim has been doing better than he has in years now that things have settled.

Dick made a lot of mistakes before. One of them being *not* getting on Tim’s case. Tim is independent, and Dick mistook that for being okay. So, to preserve the 18 year old’s promised life, Dick picks up the coffee, downing it in one go.

Tim squawks out in horror and his eyes grow wide, snatching the empty cup from Dick’s hand. He turns it over to watch one drip fall out of the cup and into his hand. In horror more befitting someone actually being murdered in front of him, Tim cries out, “What is *wrong* with you!?”

Bruce looks up from his work, startled until he sees the cup. He glances towards Dick with that unreadable expression that Dick has come to place as “concern.” When Dick sends him a short, tight lipped smile, trying to convey *I’ve got this*, Bruce hesitates, but nods. However, he doesn’t resume typing, which leads Dick to assume he’s waiting for a point where he might need to step in.

He learned what Dick had. He also knows better now than to *not* get on Tim's case about taking care of himself.

"Get up, Baby Bird!" Dick leans off of the desk and claps his hands together. When Tim doesn't move and instead glares at Dick in a way that reminds Dick of a lion going for the kill, he grabs the back of Tim's chair and starts rolling it away from the desk.

"...You're gonna have to get me upstairs in this thing." Tim sounds defiant.

"I think I'll manage."

"Dick, please, my brother, my best friend, my ride-or-die, my..." Tim falls silent when Dick isn't faltering in his steps. "You *hate* me."

He almost misses his step. Tim plays dirty. "I do *not* hate you, Tim."

"You hate me and you're trying to kill me. You want me to leave-

"Not at all, never."

"Bye, boyfie!" Steph calls out from the middle of the room, kicking her feet up when she rolls over to his spot at the computer. "I'll keep an eye on your Peter Finder, you freak."

"Do you see what you're doing to me, Dick?" Tim whines.

Dick smiles, unashamed of his tactics. There's been no almost-finger-snapping, so Tim is more tired than he's let on. "You'll live, little brother."

Tim drops his feet to drag it along, but when Dick checks over his shoulder, Tim's head is drooping down further and further. His eyes stay closed, and he gives weak protests as Dick drags the chair up a set of stairs. They pass by Alfred on the way up to Tim's room and the man doesn't blink at the sight, just telling Dick to mind the vases.

As he drags his poor younger brother against his will up the stairs, he can't stop thinking about Peter. How alone and small he looked while sitting on that roof, especially with the Gotham skyline in front of him. Gotham isn't a place for a lone kid to be wandering around- all of them know that too well. Peter is new to here, that much Dick thinks is true. He *looked* lost, and when he spoke about Queens there was a smile on his lips like Peter thought it was further away than it really is.

They wonder if the kid has a place to sleep, if he even is staying with his dad or not. From what Tim and Bruce had put into Peter's file, he apparently wears two outfits, never changing his shirt. But he does wash his clothes at a local laundromat, the same one every time. He wears the same busted up shoes everywhere he goes. The bruises on his neck were gone by the second day, but they were pretty sure it must have been makeup. He didn't want anyone else to notice the bruises, and he covered them up. So either he stole some makeup, or he has access to it from someone in his life. Which points to him having somewhere to stay.

It bothers Dick that the kid would go to such lengths just so no one would ask. He defended his dad so fiercely that he didn't want to think that Peter's dad *could* do it, but... Lots of kids

defend their parents, even though the parents had hurt them. Tim had been the same for a long time. Even though he knew what his parents had done was wrong, he wanted to believe that they loved him. The alternative was too harsh, too real. In Tim's case it had been neglect and emotional abuse, but Dick has seen enough cases to know it transfers to physical abuse as well.

And the thing is, why would he hide it, if it wasn't caused by someone he cares about? Nightwing is a known vigilante in Gotham, but outside of Gotham as well, because he branched out into the Titans and the Justice League. If he had been hurt by someone, Peter should have known that Nightwing could help him. Would arrest the person that hurt him, would find him somewhere safe to go.

It just doesn't sit right with him. With any of them.

"What the fuck are you doin'?"

Dick blinks at Jason, hauling Tim and his chair up the last step to the second floor. Jason had just woken up from the looks of his hair, his hoodie on backwards and missing a sock. It's not often that he crashed at the Manor, but ever since B came back, there has been a shift in the family. B is more open than he was before, he's trying. He's apologizing... which is the weirdest part.

Dick is suddenly struck by the memory of a 13 year old Jason Todd-Wayne rubbing his eyes sleepily, his hair all out of sorts from kicking around in his sleep, watching Dick and his friends be annoying first thing in the morning.

"Timmy needed to go to bed." Dick replies, and Jason closes his eyes. He must decide not to ask, because he shakes his head and starts to go around them to get down the stairs.

Dick watches him get halfway before saying, "Wait."

Jason doesn't wait at first. He takes a few more steps, stops, groans to himself, then looks up at Dick. He's annoyed, but listening. "What?"

"I have to go back to Bludhaven today, later this morning." Dick feels guilty for thinking about it, what with how much is happening in Gotham lately. But he has his responsibilities in Bludhaven, too, and he can't leave it for long. He just needs to go and check on there, and then he comes right back to help them with the multiple rouges that are giving Gotham trouble right now. And Peter.

Peter, that's what is bothering him. Tim and Steph are likely going to have to focus on Two-Face in the next few days, and Killer Croc won't take long to resurface. Not to mention that the specific Firefly that got out is known for playing the longer con, taking his time setting his traps. Batman will have to focus on that.

But Peter could slip away in that time...

"And?" Jason raises a brow when Dick says nothing, too lost in his thoughts.

But there's one person they can count on to check on a kid.

"Can you swing by and check on Peter?"

"Peter?"

"The kid that showed up, you know. Babs was worried about him, and now we're worried about him." Dick almost forgot that Jason was busy with Black Mask goons starting shit a couple days ago. "He's somewhere between 12 or 14 and we think someone is after him. Or maybe that his living situation is not- ideal. Or dangerous."

"Library kid."

"Yeah, that one."

Jason stares at him, then looks at the ceiling as if trying to find something. "Fuck you."

"It's just that-"

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it." Jason flips him off as he heads down the stairs. Dick is exhausted, but his nerves settled somewhat.

Tim groans and Dick looks back at him. He's halfway out of his chair and dangerously slipping towards the steps. Dick grabs under his arms and pulls him back up, abandoning the chair to instead lift Tim over his shoulder.

"Put me down."

"You can't even protest properly." Dick opens the door to Tim's room, and chucks him down on the bed. Tim mutters something along the lines of "*Fuck you*" but it's muffled with his face in the blanket. Dick turns the lights out, throws a blanket over Tim, and leaves the door cracked for Alfred to bother Tim to eat later.

-

It ended up being a good thing that Benny offered this room when he did. Otherwise, Peter would have been screwed on an astronomical scale.

Somehow, he had appeared in this world during an anomaly of Gotham's weather: it hadn't rained yet. When they were making their way up the steps to the two apartments upstairs (both of which belong to Benny), Peter caught a glimpse of the rain. It was swaths of icy water, a sheet that blanketed the entire city. Thunder rattled overhead and a chill washed over him. When Benny showed Peter the room and saw that Peter kept looking outside the window, he commented that Peter was lucky.

"It's always raining, and it's always cold."

Had Benny not offered this place when he did, Peter would have gone back to that water silo and not known the rain was coming. Not only would it have destroyed all of his belongings

(except the water proof hero material), Peter would have spent a long time trying to find a place to get out of the rain and ended up a popsicle.

The fact that this weather is *common* for Gotham doesn't bode well for Peter, not with his thermoregulation issues. Even inside, a chill is cast over the room that he can feel under his clothes.

It's also a good thing that all of Peter's belongings fit inside this backpack, so he didn't have to return to the water silo to get his stuff. It could have been a lot worse than it ended up being.

He's lucky.

Lucky.

He sets down his backpack on the mattress, gaining his bearings with the room. It's small, but Peter doesn't mind that. He's lived in a practical closet before, shared rooms with a bunch of foster siblings. Hell, he slept on the floor more in his life than he's slept on a real bed. He could live anywhere and make it work.

This room has a closet on the wall with the door, opposite a twin bed with fresh sheets and blankets. There's a desk and a lamp at the foot of the bed, right next to one of the two windows on that wall. The room *isn't* attached to Benny's apartment, which settles his nerves even more. Benny's apartment is across the hall, though they share a kitchen. Not attached to Peter's room but on the same side is a bathroom that he also doesn't share with Benny.

He likes Benny and is decently aware that he is not a danger, but staying in a stranger's apartment is never the best idea.

Benny told him that he uses this place to help people like Peter out. He wonders how many people have passed through this room, and how many looked like him. He's glad that Benny isn't a snitch, and he's even more glad that the man didn't comment on Peter's age.

Kids and homelessness... well, it's always one of two options how people think of kids like Peter. Either they look at him with disgust (well disguised or not), or they're heartbroken. Whether this offer from Benny was out of pity, gratitude, or kindness, Peter accepts this opportunity that just fell into his lap. This time.

It's not that he's ungrateful. He just *really* hates pity. When people get that *look*, and they think about helping him...

Not because they are ill intentioned, but because they are ill *informed*. Peter didn't want to get close to people, it meant that they would eventually try to help him. And people who had happy lives like that- stable and normal, they don't understand. They think they were doing good, calling the cops about this kid, and he *knows* their hearts were in the right place. But he also knew better than them about the system they thought was his best hope.

(Or they would die, if he *really* got close to them.)

After the Battle of Manhattan, the foster care system in New York turned over. Foster families died, and regular families died, and the system was filled with so many kids who had nowhere to go. There was too much to keep up with, too many tragedies.

Kids slipped through the cracks.

Peter just happened to be one of them.

His first foster family, they were fostering Peter to adopt him. They were kind, and all things good. He still thinks about them, about what his life would have been had they not died in the Battle. They were proof that the foster system itself wasn't irredeemable. It was likely just Parker Luck that made it so bad for *him*.

Whatever the case, he was better off alone at that time. Pity wasn't accepted because pity came from people with good intentions and bad results. But he *needs* the help now, so he accepts the pity this *one* time, because it isn't coming with Benny calling CPS. If it does, Peter will be out before they get here.

(Oh, man, he can't even begin to imagine how bad Gotham's foster care system must be. If New York after the Battle was bad, Gotham's must be hell on Earth.)

There's a lot of things that this means for him.

For one, he's not *homeless*, he has a proper place to stay. (Though, homeless isn't just sleeping in the streets. Homeless could also mean exactly what Peter is doing, it could mean drifting from house to house. The details are not lost on Peter, he just wants a win right now.)

For two, this should get the Bats off his back if they think he's in danger, right? If they're just suspicious of him, then they'll keep watching him. And if they were worried about him, then this should ease that worry and they'll leave him alone.

Peter watches the steady fall of the rain, perched on the end of his bed. The only view outside was of the brick wall of the other building next to the restaurant, and it is getting dark outside.

...What if the Bats *don't* leave him alone? If they stick to him, he'll have to just... rip that band-aid off. They'll show their true colors once Peter shows himself.

Something about that makes his skin crawl. Not in a spider-sense way- no, in fact, it's rather silent at the moment. That nagging voice in the back of his mind is sniffing around, reminding him of how different this world is, yet exactly the same as before. Peter has a handle on it, he does. He's not freaking out, he's not...

Well, he *is* alone. But not really. Everything is going to be fine.

Eventually, Peter turned to his comms again.

The rain has started to settle as he turns the comms in his hand, inspecting the inside parts. He works methodically, almost on muscle memory. Tony had shown Peter the ins and outs of most of his tech. He still remembers when Tony first showed him how to operate a comm- it

was right after Peter got settled into living with them, before Peter went to a summer camp for his new school.

Tony had sat him down in his lab and gave his same no-nonsense (but all the nonsense) type of lesson as he had done so many times before. He let Peter hold the working parts, made him identify the inner mechanics, made Peter explain what it's purpose was.

"To communicate between teammates." Peter had answered.

"And to call for help." Tony had added.

This had been fresh after Peter's kidnapping. He had just made his first appointment with his therapist, and didn't know what was in store for him. But something about Tony and this moment felt like it made all the sense in the world.

"I know I'm not the poster child for asking for help, but it is important. See, kid, what I've learned is that... carrying everything on your shoulders, it is bound to break you at some point. There is a reason it was a punishment for Atlas."

Tony had held his gaze for a long stretch of silence. Not waiting for Peter to speak, but rather collecting his own thoughts. He'd never known Tony to drop a serious talk like this. A lot of Tony's lessons were between jokes or in the middle of a lecture. This was neither.

He hadn't said much about what *he* was feeling when he found Peter and got him out of that lab. He just told Peter how he was going to fix it. Peter knew that he would, without him saying.

"I want you to know that you can call for me."

"I did."

Because he had. Peter had managed to call Tony to get him before he was overwhelmed and knocked out. If he hadn't, they wouldn't have gotten his last location, and it would have taken longer to find Peter and the lab he was brought to, with the other kids.

*"I know, you called for me. But I need to you **know**, Peter. Every time you call, I'll be there. And- that's what the comm is for."* Tony had picked up the comm and Peter tracked his every movement, reading between the lines.

Other people need it to be said out loud, but Peter is good at reading body language. His eyesight lets him track the most minuscule of details, his hearing lets him know every intake of breath. Tony was promising he'd come every time Peter needed him, but he was *saying* that Peter had a support system. He doesn't work alone anymore.

"Thanks, Tony."

Tony had smiled, grabbed his head with one hand, and pressed Peter's forehead on his shoulder, tucked his chin over Peter's head. *"I know, I'm great. It's good you acknowledge that, Bambino."*

He's approaching four days without hearing from anyone.

His thumb clicks the edge of the comm without thinking about it. He hadn't noticed he finished fixing it until he snapped back into the present. He hears the crackle come to life, but it settles on static without a specific frequency to set to.

With a tug at his heart, he pulls the comm up to his ear and settles back into the chair of his desk now. He wraps his arms around his knees, staring out the window to his left. The rain is starting to subside. The static almost reminds him of the hum of Tony's arc reactor. If he closes his eyes and deludes himself.

"Hey," Peter's voice feels heavy.

Back when dinner was a one person affair, Peter would speak to the only picture he had of his uncle and aunt. He'd talk about his day, pretending that in another world, they were sitting around the table together. In that perfect world, Peter was still Spider-Man, but nothing ever went *wrong*. May never had her heart attack, and Ben hadn't...

He'd ignore the silence between his own words. Sometimes pretending they were replying to him.

"It's day three of Wonderland." Peter tells the empty room. Part of him wishes Tony would walk through the door, all confidence and pompadour. "I found a place to stay, finally. Lucky, too, because it started raining outside. Benny, the owner of this burger joint I found? He's the one who let me stay here."

Peter can only hear static.

"I'm... I'm gonna get back, right?" Peter asks. The anxiety has started to bubble up inside of him. "I'm not gonna be alone like that again."

More static. He can trick himself into thinking it's a voice, if he wanted to.

"It's not like I'll never see you or Pepper again." Peter says, but is he telling Tony this, or is he telling himself? "It's not like the *other* times. Because we're both alive. Just... in different spots. You're not- You're not dead. And I'm not alone."

But isn't he? Isn't Peter alone right now?

It had been like that the last times. Only before, Peter was left behind. This time, Peter was the one who disappeared.

"No, no it isn't like that." Peter slams the comm onto the table and gets up from the desk chair, pacing around the room and biting his thumbnail. "I didn't- Tony wouldn't think I'm dead. He'd keep looking for me. He said if I needed him, he'd come- and even if I didn't need him, he'd be there. We're a team."

But you're not *really* his son.

“I know that.” Peter replies to himself. He probably looks crazy to any outside observer- what a drama queen. Jeez, he’s overthinking this again. He takes a breath, hands out in front of him. Until he realizes that he’s shaking, and he instead attempts to put his hands in his pockets.

“I’m not- I know that. But he takes care of me. And- And he-”

It’s too stuffy in this room, Peter thinks. He can feel the walls are too close, too in his way. Every wall is surrounding him, keeping him pinned in here just like- just like the closet he stayed in, just like that lab had pinned him down and made him feel weak all over again. But they aren’t actually closing in, right?

He turns to the window, where rain has started to drift from downpour to sprinkle. Peter feels the shiver of the cold in anticipation, but it’s- it’s not that bad.

Peter is lucky. He has somewhere to come back to, if the rain gets bad.

“This is fine,” Peter tells himself as he opens the window, relieved to find a fire escape waiting for him, like it was telling him this is a genius idea. “Just a quick walk around the corner.”

That’s what he promises himself. He just needs to *walk*, to pace somewhere that isn’t this new room, this reminder that he isn’t at home. That he isn’t getting ready for dinner, that Tony and Pepper aren’t just down the hall. This reminder that it’s *not like the other times*, but also *exactly* the same as before. This- this situation he’s in, it is entirely unfamiliar to him, not like the water silo and sleeping on roofs.

It’s harder to pretend everything is *fine* if he’s somewhere that he hasn’t *been* before, that he knows so well. This room isn’t his room at Tony’s, and it isn’t where he was taking care of himself before- and he just needs to walk around to get used to that fact.

It isn’t like before, but it is.

Peter used to be Parker, he was 12 and 13 years old but he handled himself damn fine on the streets. He made money with side jobs, he ran from the cops, he took care of people he came across. He had *friends* on the street, even if they didn’t know his real name. Parker lived in Queens, but Peter is living in Gotham, and *god, please don’t make him start over*.

He wants to believe that it’s going to be okay. Tony wouldn’t give up on him, and Peter wouldn’t give up on Tony. So what if this is like back then? Peter has to suck it up, quit being a baby about it.

The street doesn’t do anything to settle his chattering nerves, unfortunately. The anxiety swirls around in his mind, reminding him of all the other times this happened, when Peter had to start over, or when he lost someone.

His parents went first, ripped from the sky before they even got the *chance* to be a family that Peter could remember. After that, Peter stayed in a foster home for the first time before Uncle Ben and Aunt May could get approved to take care of him.

That house was full of kids, and Peter was an only child for his life before that. He wasn't used to the noise, the lack of privacy, the fighting or the fact that everyone walked on eggshells. One of his first memories is not of his parents, but of an older teen fussing at him for crying at night. They had grabbed his arm and hissed at him:

"Get over it already. Life happens."

He was glad when Uncle Ben and Aunt May took him in. They never got mad when Peter cried.

But then he got lost, and Aunt May collapsed, when he was nine. It was only a few years with her, but he still remembers how soft her hair was when she hugged him.

Get over it already. Life happens.

And then Uncle Ben, a year later. The gunshots still echo in Peter's nightmares.

Get over it already. Life happens.

Then Karen, Devon, and Chandler. The Battle of Manhattan had taken them so soon after he lost Ben, and he still remembers the *crunch* when rubble fell from the sky-

Get over it already. Life happens.

Clara Noble, a nice older woman that laughed all the time. Who had that brain aneurysm, she had been so *nice* to Peter-

Get over it already. Life happens.

Dolores Basset drowning in the family pool-

Get over it already. Life happens.

Deaths that he must have caused, because Peter is the only common denominator in all of their lives and early deaths-

Get over it already. Life happens.

No, no, calm down. Peter reminds himself. *It wasn't your fault. No one died because of you.*

Tony wasn't- it didn't happen the same way. Neither of them are dead. This can be fixed. It's going to be okay.

He can take care of himself, he has been for so long. Everything is going to be okay.

It's different but it's the same.

It's not okay. Peter is NOT okay.

Endless sky. Ash. Can't breathe. Can't get away- Just like before.

Here!

Dark Alley. The cold made him tired. Is dying cold?

Look out!

Gunshot. Couldn't hold the blood in, his hands were too small-

Here Look Out Here Behind Front!

Peter backs up just as he hears the shuffle of a foot in a puddle. Too little too late, he paid attention to his spider-sense. An arm wraps around Peter's throat, yanking him backwards and pulling him off balance. He grabs at the wrist that squeezes his throat, and falls still when a gun is pressed against his temple. Inky shadows turn to faces in front of him, laughter piercing through the low buzz of his thoughts.

"-dumb kid." Someone is saying when Peter snaps back to attention. They flick Peter's forehead. "He doesn't have any money, look at him. He's like, eight years old."

"Shut up, you fucking loser." Peter growls, attempting to pry the arm off of him. It squeezes tighter. Peter almost freaks, almost tears it off of him, but he *feels* the pull of his muscles and knows he's about to rip skin off of bone and he freezes.

Oh god.

Peter almost did something fucking terrible.

He sucks in a short gasp and closes his eyes for a second. He can *not* lose his control and accidentally do that to someone. Ben would be so fucking disappointed in him, so ashamed to know him.

Think rationally, Peter.

He doesn't have his mask on, he can't pull any risky moves that would out him as a meta. With the rain mixing the smells around him, he's unsure if this group of guys are keeping bullets or not. He doesn't see any familiar faces, so it doesn't appear to be revenge for earlier that day. At least, that he can tell.

Likely unrelated. He might have to rely on just his spider-sense to tell whether these guys mean business or not. Peter needs to be *calm* if he wants to listen to his spider-sense, but calm is getting harder to hold onto after having an anxiety attack.

"My bad, my bad," The man snarks, and he clearly doesn't feel bad at all. "But what use is a twerp who ain't got any money?"

"Parents might," Another tells him. Peter is counting how many there are... One, two, three... five people. One's a woman, hanging towards the back as a look out. Wait, parents? "Where do you live, kid? Let's give mommy and daddy a visit."

“Go to hell.” He bites, glaring at the men. He doesn’t have sympathy for people who use kids as shields or for personal gain.

But he still can’t *hurt* them. How does he get out of this one? Should he just go for it? Ugh, how could he be so stupid and get caught in this? He should have been paying attention- no, he shouldn’t have left his *room* in the first place.

“How bout I take you with me?” The man replies. Peter sees the flash of a revolver in his hand and his body tenses, knowing the hit is about to come.

But his body freezes.

Ben, gunshot, his hands were too small-

Think, Peter, think! His eyes shut as the guy holding him squeezes tighter, cutting off his air. It’s getting a little hard to breathe, and his hands are trembling. Weak, too weak.

Too weak.

*Peter can’t push (calm) back, he’s not strong- calm- Not like an adult is. **calm** - His hands are too weak (**calm**) and he can’t breathe-*

calm down!

Peter bites down on his cheek. *Focus!*

“Shit!” The woman pushes through the group with a screech of terror. “Red Hood!”

Peter falls back onto concrete when the guy lets him go out of nowhere. He smells their fear cloud the air, and he slaps a hand over his ears as a shot rings out in the street. *Too loud so loud holy shit why is everything so loud-* A scream of pain cuts through him as a man falls next to Peter, there’s a crunch when his mouth meets ground.

The man spits blood onto the concrete. His nose is jammed, crooked and pouring blood in a steady stream. The man’s hand trembles, he glances to his right, at Peter. There’s a crazed look in his eyes that makes everything scream at him *back away get away!*

Peter scrambles to get away from the man, but in his desperation, he grabs onto Peter’s arm and swings him around, gun pressed against his temple. Peter ducks and pushes out of his grip just in time for another shot to hit the man’s gun hand. He yowls in pain, the gun clattering onto the wet pavement

His spider-sense is ringing out, but he can’t listen to it as it mixes with unseen memories. It feels like a wall as everything hits him all at once: *CALM BLOOD TOO SMALL TOO WEAK CALM FOCUS GET AWAY RUN BAD BAD BAD BAD!* Peter crawls away and towards the closest wall, his adrenaline spiking and his head swimming with voices. There’s a thud of a fist hitting face and Peter flinches, ducks down and forces in a deep breath.

THINK!

Red Hood, Red Hood, Red Hood- That was-

Peter bites down on his lip, daring to look up at the fight, but it's more like a take down. A slaughter. They're all sprawled on the ground, and the only one with the upper-hand is a man in a leather jacket, his face obscured by some kind of red helmet. His back is facing Peter, taller than the muggers and more fierce.

Peter's mind is fuzzy as he tries to cool down from his panic, trying to remember he isn't a kid anymore.

He's Spider-Man, no one can hurt Spider-Man.

It's gonna be okay. He just has to think. Get it together, Parker.

Red Hood- that was- That's one of the villains that Peter read on the wiki. Right?

Yeah- that was- *Deep breath, Peter.*

Red Hood... That was the crime lord that was listed. He wanted to stay *away* from that guy, that's the one that had such an extensive list of crimes. Peter presses against the wall, hoping he looks too small for the man to notice he's there. Why? Why *is* he here? Why would he start attacking a random group of muggers? Is he gonna try to hurt Peter, too?

The silence is the worse part as the fist fight comes to an end. Peter's skin buzzes as he attempts to stick to the shadows near the wall. *Get away get away get away.* He peeks between his arms to find an escape route- sees one too late- when a voice calls out, "Are you okay?"

Peter flinches, daring to look up.

Red Hood is shaking his gloved hands out. Peter can hear how loud his heart is from here, and it's not just from the fight, or the adrenaline. Peter can't tell who he's talking to, because surely, a villain like that wouldn't be *worried* about Peter.

But he's wrong, apparently. Red Hood turns his way, obviously looking right at him, and Peter sinks back into the wall some more, his voice caught in his throat. For a split second, the helmet covering his face looks so much like the Iron Man suit in the yellow street light.

...?...

He's got blood on his boots, his pants, his knuckles. And there's a bunch of people around him holding onto their gunshot wounds, groaning in pain. He'd read about a duffle bag with 8 heads in it. For all these reasons, Peter should still be terrified.

However, Peter's spider senses calm down as soon as Red Hood turns his attention on him.

Everything falls silent. The panic is gone, replaced instead by the aftermath of adrenaline and surprise. None of the loud buzzing from before lingers. It's just him and his spider-sense, and that almost scary calm it has towards someone who is supposed to be a *crime lord*.

Either Peter is broken, or he's wrong about this guy. Or Gotham is a fucked up, crazy mess in ways he hadn't even accounted for.

Something about Peter's silence, or maybe how he's still trying to get against the wall, makes Red Hood crouch down. He gets smaller, balancing on his toes in a squat in front of Peter, putting his weapons on the ground.

"Are you okay?" He repeats, his voice growing softer than before.

Oh.

Peter nods, not exactly trusting his voice at the moment.

Red Hood nods back, but it might be more for himself than for Peter. He's looking at the muggers on the ground, and Peter recognizes the anger, that tenseness in his shoulders. But...

...not Peter...? ...

He's not angry at Peter. That's... good. Yeah, that's good. His voice is low as he touches his ear, as if he doesn't want Peter to hear it. Of course, Peter still does. "*Get someone over here to deal with these.*"

Police? Peter gulps down his nerves and assesses how far he could run away on shaky limbs. Not very far, he thinks. He's still technically panicking, even if it's not at the forefront of his mind anymore.

Why does he always have to get attacked during an emotional freak-out? Can't the bad guys take an hour off just for once?

Red Hood puts his weapons back into his belt and stands up, but he's keeping his shoulders hunched as he gets closer to Peter. His voice is a murmur, barely able to come through because the helmet muffles his voice. There's a voice modulator on there, and the similarities between he and Iron Man are no more.

"Let's get you away from here, yeah?"

Peter again nods dumbly, wondering if he should rely on his spider-sense this much. But it says that Red Hood is *safe safe safe*, and he's clearly trying not to scare him more than he was. Red Hood reaches low to grab Peter's hand, and Peter grips it a little harder than he meant to.

The man- and he certainly is a grown up, because he's tall like one and broad shouldered like Bucky but he's kind of built like a tank- smooths back his hair with the hand that's clear of blood. It's a simple move that could just be for comfort, but Peter's been in enough fights to know that his mentors do that to subtly check if Peter got a head wound they don't know about. He leads Peter farther from the group, before looping an arm under his and grabbing something from his belt.

A grappling hook. Peter recognizes it's the same type that Nightwing had used, as well as Red Robin, Spoiler, and potentially Batman. Red Hood reaches out towards a taller building

in sight, and he runs to pull Peter along. Peter grips on tightly to his leather jacket, having not expected they were going up on a *roof*. Red Hood drops him to sit on the side of the building, then pulls himself up as well. He sits right next to Peter, unhooking the grappling hook and setting it to the side.

From up here, they can keep an eye on the muggers that attacked him. Sirens wail in the distance. And all Peter can think to ask is:

“How are ambulance fees covered here?”

Red Hood is quiet and he doesn’t move for a few seconds. He then turns to look at Peter, and in the most incredulous tone Peter has heard so many times before, asks, “What?”

There’s a voice from Red Hood’s comm, that Peter shouldn’t be able to hear. “*What?*”

“They’re clearly broke.” Peter replies to both of them.

“That’s your concern right now?”

“It’s not a concern. I’m just curious.” They fall into another bout of silence. “...I’m assuming that means you don’t know.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Red Hood reaches up as if to pinch the bridge of his nose, but only meets metal. He instead runs his hand over the top as if he’s messing with his hair. But he’s bald right now. “Is this the shock talking?”

“Probably.” Peter replies, looking at his feet. There’s blood on his shoe. His Good Luck shoes. “There’s a good chance. But I also just say wack shit sometimes.”

“What were you doin’ out walkin’ at this hour? You *know* there’s a curfew for a reason, right?” Red Hood sounds angry, so Peter thinks he should cool it with the jokes. But also, he can’t tell if he’s angry at Peter or at something else. He might be angry at Peter. His spider-sense argues otherwise. His common sense, too.

“I needed a stroll.” Peter says, immediately backing out on not telling jokes. Who is he without his whimsy? “A walk around the block. Clear the mind.”

“You could have *died*.” The man crime lord guy presses, like the hypocrite he might maybe is, possibly. He talks with his hands a lot. “Or have been *seriously* injured. What if I wasn’t there?”

Then those guys would have met a Peter who had a hard time holding back a punch.

He bites down that retort. “Shit happens.”

Red Hood stares at him. Is this how people feel when Peter looks at them in the Spider-Man costume? It’s hard to tell what someone is thinking based on body language and no facial features to watch. And Peter put a lot of effort into reading faces. Maybe he should put that on his costume... like, maybe the eyes could move around, and tell them what he’s trying to express.

Focus.

“Where’s your parents? Why would they let you walk out at night?”

Peter was hoping that wouldn’t come up, but that’s just his luck. “My dad is- He’s... out, right now. He didn’t know.”

“Out? Out where?”

“Somewhere.” Peter turns away from him, looking down the other street.

He sees the flash of Bat go by.

A short second of a swing that Peter shouldn’t have seen. There’s a familiar (by now, Peter thinks he knows) heartbeat in the shadows behind a billboard above them, far away. Peter shouldn’t be able to see him, and it takes everything in him not to stare at Batman while he tries to figure out what he’s doing *here*.

And that’s when it *hits* Peter who this guy is. Peter glances back at Red Hood, and he wonders how he could have jumped to assumptions that this was a villain.

There’s a *huge* red bat symbol on his chest. He’s another Bat.

Of course.

They’ve been stalking him for days now, so why wouldn’t tonight be the same? They were here because they were watching him, looking for him. Looking *out* for him? This is debatable.

And man, Peter isn’t mad, but he is frustrated that he doesn’t know the exact reason why they’re following him. He doesn’t want to think anymore and try to understand adults and their motivations. He’s so *tired* of doing that.

“So you have *no* idea where he is?” Red Hood doesn’t sound like he’s asking, but more pointing this out to Peter. Like Peter should fully understand how stupid it is. But the thing is, Peter *knows*.

“Why the hell would he just leave you alone?”

Now that hits Peter harder than it should have. *He doesn’t know. Don’t blow up.*

“When did he leave you-?”

“He’s coming for me!” Peter shouts, blowing up anyways. He jumps up from the side of the roof and Red Hood’s arms rocket forward as if to catch him. But it’s seconds and Peter has already backed away from Red Hood, away from the ledge and instead on solid roof. Red Hood grabs the empty air, hesitates, and turns his head to stare at Peter (*watching*). The anger bubbling up is a mix of all things- he can’t let anyone think bad of Tony, because they have no idea what happened.

But the anxiety chips away at him. It has been for days now.

You're alone. You can't call for help.

“He wouldn’t leave me, he knows I can’t do that again!” Peter says, and it’s more like he’s begging Red Hood to understand- for all these Bats to understand. Because they’ve been following him around for that, now he’s *sure*. They don’t suspect Peter is trouble, they suspect he’s in it.

Peter fights back the lump in his throat but his voice cracks anyway. “He promised. Don’t talk about him like that!”

Red Hood holds his hand up as if Peter was going to attack. Which would be hilarious, if Peter wasn’t so emotional and angry right now. Red Hood has no reason to believe Peter could hurt him- Peter looks like a twig next to a boulder.

“Hey, I’m sorry.” Red Hood tells him, and it sounds so genuine that Peter almost blue screens. “I can tell you really care about him.”

I can tell you really care about him.

He *still* doesn’t believe Peter. And why would he? In their eyes, Tony has left Peter to the dogs, dropped him in Gotham for a reason they don’t know. He had shown up with bruises- it’s all obvious, but when Peter tries to think about telling them what is really going on, he thinks *They aren’t my team*.

They aren’t- he doesn’t *know* them. He knows all of the tells of his teammates, and they know his. He can trust the Avengers because they’ve trained and they eat together and they *live* in the same damn building. Unpredictable adults are the scariest ones. And Peter- he can do this alone. He doesn’t need help.

~~Too stubborn for your own good.~~

Peter knows that Tony wouldn’t... He wouldn’t leave him alone. Not on purpose.

(And then there’s that feeling, that reminder that he knows what it’s like to be laying on a lab table and someone hovering over him, testing if he was going to die or not with unfamiliar chemicals in his system. Trying to see what will kill him. And Peter couldn’t fight back, but he also couldn’t *die* like a normal kid.

That reminder that Peter ran from foster care because he *knew* not only that no one would believe him, but that if they found out he was a mutant, they’d send him away to do exactly that.

No metas in Gotham.

He can’t do that again.)

Red Hood doesn’t know. Peter thinks bitterly, and he once again feels angry at himself for shouting. He snapped at Nightwing, too, and now he has to apologize *twice*.

“...Sorry,” Peter mutters, but he doesn’t get closer to Red Hood. “But Tony’s *not* a bad guy. You and the other bats gotta know that.”

Red Hood tilts his head, and Peter scoffs under his breath. Peter, not wanting to admit he can tell they’re stalking him, decides on another excuse.

“Nightwing didn’t believe me either.”

And that’s the *oh* moment for Red Hood. The man sighs, leaning over to put his head in his hand as he thinks about it. Peter *has* to fill the silence. They need to know- Or is Peter just scared that he’ll forget it, if he doesn’t defend Tony?

“He cares about me. He wouldn’t leave me unless he *had* to. He’s the best foster dad I’ve ever had, and I won’t let you guys think he’s not.” Peter practically begs, knowing the others can probably hear him on the comms. “He never hits me, and I don’t even get scared when he yells, and he’s- he’s not here right *now* but it isn’t his fault, and you guys just don’t *get* it.”

Red Hood picks his head up. “You’re right, I don’t get it.”

Peter can’t decide on what Red Hood might be thinking. It’s because of that damned mask, Peter can’t read his face. He chews his bottom lip, wondering if he’s said too much, or too little, or- or he doesn’t know.

This was a mistake. He should have just taken the roofs if he wanted to clear his mind. Maybe he would have just run into a Bat and not get into all of this. His mind wouldn’t be fresh off of a panic attack, and just swirling with insecurity. He knows how to hide insecurity better than panic.

“Gotham isn’t a good place for kids.” Red Hood tells him. He’s looking down at the street where the muggers are. Peter can’t see them from this angle anymore, but he can hear the ambulances loading up. “They get hurt, or they get dragged into something they don’t understand.”

“I’m not a baby, and I’m not stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were either of those things, now did I?” Red Hood retorts. “If we can keep just one kid from getting caught up in a fucked up situation, then that’s what we try to do.”

Peter stares at the back of the man’s head. It feels like eyes are on him from all over, and that’s without his spider senses murmuring in his ear: *watching watching watching..*

He should tell them.

His spider-senses are telling him that Red Hood is safe. His common sense is too, because *none* of the Bats have hurt him. (Yet?) But spider-senses can’t tell him whether or not to place trust into someone, that’s all up to him, and his own deduction skills.

Just because Red Hood doesn’t mean harm to him right *now*, doesn’t mean that that couldn’t change if he or the Bats find out he’s a meta.

No. No he shouldn't tell them.

"I'm not in trouble." Peter says, and it's a lie. He wonders if Red Hood can tell.

"But you'd tell someone, if you were?"

It *feels* like he knows Peter is lying.

"Yeah. I would."

-

Peter was allowed to get off of the roof when everyone was gone. He could tell that he was being watched all the way back to his room, so he stayed on foot and even pretended the door to get inside was heavy. He sped up the staircase, quiet so as to not wake Benny, and he shut his blinds as soon as he got in his room.

So... now they know where he's living.

This is totally fine.

In the morning, after getting a decent night's rest on a bed and not on concrete, Peter felt better than he had in days. Which sucks, because it basically is just saying that Peter needed to sleep properly and that is why he was losing his shit. But whatever- he now knows that he'll just have to get used to his living arrangement over time, and all will be chill again.

For the next three days, he stays inside for the most part, not wanting to repeat what happened before... maybe hoping the Bats would get off his case if they saw he wasn't "being reckless" anymore. He thought that with the recent event, the Bats would stick around to test exactly that, but he turned out to be wrong. Peter felt the stalking wane from two Bats a night to none.

Batman wasn't strolling by anymore during the night to loom over Benny's restaurant, and if *someone* did, it was Red Robin. Last night, no one stopped by at all. So... There weren't as many eyes on him.

He convinces himself that this was a good thing- that's what he wanted. Sure, he sort of wonders if the opportunity to get help was just thrown out of the window. But the more rational side of himself says that he made a good call.

"*Don't trust that spidey-sense all the time, Peter.*" He imitates Natasha's voice as he sits at his desk, and quite *well* if he does say so, and he do. "*You never know how fast intentions can shift.*"

He hums back at his own words as he hunches over his desk, picking at the project in his hands as he replies, "But what if they really *are* good people?"

Peter pauses his work, looking up at the ceiling.

"I'm talking to myself. *Again.* Geez, isolation does wonders on my psyche."

He shrugs off the slight-crazy tendencies that appear when he's by himself too long (because this is nothing new, and he knows that), focusing instead on his newest project. Because it's super important that he gets this done today.

The second night after he talked to Red Hood, Peter sensed the villain nearby again. But he could also tell that Red Robin was close as well, and he decided it wasn't worth the risk. It was way too soon, and he also didn't even have a *plan* on how to capture the guy yet. He's had lesson after lesson drilled into his skull on not being reckless, and while he will admit that he is *very much* still reckless, he's done better at looking for the "will this work out in the long-run" plans than the "fuck it, we ball" mentality he used to have. While not totally gone, Peter knows better than to fight someone who has the advantage on him.

Spider-senses *can* only get him so far. That's what he has to remind himself, near constantly. Natasha says that he relies on them *too* much, but it's a hard habit to break. Peter had never thought that it could be unreliable, because he's used it as a tool for so long, and it's kept him safe and alive so far.

But it isn't the only part of Peter that can be reliable.

Tony will sometimes knock twice on his forehead, and he'll grumble, "*Kid, you've got this for a reason.*" Which translates to "*Peter, you're very smart, and you should trust yourself more than you do.*" in Tony speak. At least, that's what Pepper and Dr. Banner told him it meant, and he's inclined to agree because Tony hadn't done anything to reject the idea, and instead he had deflected the conversation to what they should have for lunch.

So, in an effort to follow the advice of his mentors, Peter used his brain.

This villain has the advantage over Peter because Peter doesn't have the ability to combat those jumps. Which means that Peter should level the playing field, right?

He's just as capable of using some backyard junks of metal (and Benny's old tool kit) to create something that will put them on the same level, at least for now. He still has shit to do about how weirdly strong that guy is- he must be enhanced- but he can figure that out better when he gets into the fight itself. There isn't enough information to go on for his strength.

What Peter is working on now (because he finished his comm), is a wrist piece much like that villains in design, but Peter's has a different effect. He couldn't replicate the spacial jumping- not without getting a look at the thing up close, like he *really*, really wants to.-

(Because holy shit, you know? Peter thought that without magic, humans would have to use a particle accelerator to even think about crossing dimensional thresholds. But this guy managed to stick it to his wrist! Peter's so jealous right now he wants to scream!)

-But he *can* make a device that senses the pressure in the air caused by his jumps.

It wasn't too hard, really. Peter just came to the conclusion that the jumps impacted the air surrounding the spacial jumper, it's a simple case of displacement of matter. When this guy suddenly left a space, the air would converge inwards where he had been, and when he appeared somewhere, the air would shift outwards- it would cause a rapid change in air

pressure and temperature. The jumps don't take more than a few seconds, but they *have* to be causing reactions in the air, it's simple science.

There's a pressure wave, one that Peter is sort of able to detect with his sixth sense, but would be better suited for this tech of his. It'll also detect the temperature changes and air displacement, energy fluctuations, the like.

So... sort of like a weather radar of some kind, in that aspect. A weather radar that's made of a laptop and a toaster he found in a garbage can, but it's something. His first webshooters had been made using junkyard parts as well. RIP to the furby that helped him out with that.

He thinks he'll call it the Jumping Radar, or something. Maybe an acronym could be cool, like Tony does? He... Can't think of anything in particular. He'll come up with a cooler name. Probably. For now, Jumping Radar will have to do.

Instead of keeping it on his wrist, because his webshooters always have dibs on that space, Peter instead decided to make this device attach to his forearm. He moves his arm up and down now, checking to see if it would slip around. Junkyard parts aren't the most stable when it comes to this. He wishes he had Stark Tech right about now, but old school is fine, and sort of makes him nostalgic in a good way.

It's not done, though. He's missing a few parts that he won't find in a junkyard, he'll have to figure out where a hardware store is; Benny might be kind enough to tell him. And he still needs to test it properly. He should start making a map, too...

Actually, there's a more pressing matter at hand that Peter needs to deal with before he tests his prototype.

Just because Batman and the others *appear* to have backed off, doesn't mean that they *did*. If Peter wants to make sure that Batman isn't still on his case, he's going to have to get a little payback stalking in.

It *would* complicate things if Batman followed Peter around and he either missed his chance to fight/find the hide out, or Batman jumped into the fight and messed with Peter's chances. Surely, the man wouldn't mind. Peter just needs to do a little digging around, it's nothing personal.

(He's *so* not going to enjoy this...

Ok, maybe a little.)

Peter puts the Jumping Radar in his backpack, zipping it up tight and leaving it on his desk. He makes sure to keep some money on him (nothing crazy, just enough) and pauses when he makes his way to the window. He hangs there on the sill, staring at his backpack with one foot out on the fire escape.

Should... Peter suit up?

Nahhh. That would be a bad idea.

If Batman is able to find Peter as easily as Peter is able to find Batman, then he shouldn't introduce Spidey to Gotham just yet. It would get Batman on his case as an unsanctioned vigilante and potential threat. No, much easier to explain Peter being out than Spidey- Peter is already known for taking walks around Gotham at night.

Right. Not this time- Peter isn't ready yet. He apologizes to his suit and ducks out onto the fire escape. He does, however, keep his webshooters on his wrist, hidden under his jacket sleeves. They look like black wrist warmers unless someone gets right up close, so that'll be fine.

He takes a couple leaps and a few skips onto the roofs, getting back into the (not) swing of things. If he wasn't going around as Peter, he would have just swung around, but he supposes it's a good idea to brush up his parkour skills.

He weaves around the jangled mess of buildings of the Upper East Side, almost like a dance of stone and pipe and bad advertisements on billboards.

Gotham has a different work than New York, what with all of these old, *old* buildings around. New York certainly has the old buildings, but nothing like this. This feels like it's straight out of that *Hunchback of Natre Dame* movie. There are gargoyles on the roofs and battlements that he passes by, each one their own type of unique.

A lot of the buildings look like cathedrals, the apartments close together. But then sometimes, like right now, as Peter stands atop a roof and looks down at a city that reminds him of the black and white photos of the Industrial Revolution. It's like Gotham has stepped out of multiple time periods- or, no, all the time periods settled in one place, rather than having the city move on.

Peter is surprised by how fast it was to feel a Bat nearby. He follows the tingle of his spider senses- which, is *weirdly* happy to know that a Bat is nearby, based on its *hello!*- and ducks into the shadows as he climbs the wall, five blocks away from Benny's. Are they nearby because of Peter? Or is this unrelated?

Voices float down from above him, and Peter tilts his head to the side as he listens.

"Red Robin-"

"Oh, come on, B. Just look at this little face."

"You can not take it home."

Peter was wondering about the third, tiny heartbeat. Scaling up the side of the building, Peter presses himself flat and peeks over. Far enough away from where Peter is to not notice him, Batman and Red Robin are standing together. Red Robin is hunched over a small orange cat that has a clipped ear, purring loudly in his hands. Batman is pretending to be apathetic to this scene, but Peter hears the small amusement in his tone.

"We have far too many animals at the home already."

“We can *afford* it. You let Robin take home whatever animal he wants.”

“I do not, otherwise we would have three turkeys.” *What?????* “There’s a shelter nearby here that can take him in.”

They’re just gonna breeze past that???? Peter wants to know about the turkeys!

Red Robin scoffs, picking up the cat to show Batman. “How do you know it’s a boy?”

“Orange cats are not typically female.”

“Boooo,” Red Robin gives Batman a thumbs down.

Peter risks it and hops onto the roof, creeping upwards through pipes and metal on the top of the building. He crawls around a narrow passage of grate and wall and shimmies up to the top of the billboard. He swings his legs over the side and drops down silently to the metal walkway. He crouches low, and when they show no signs of noting Peter’s presence, he ends up sitting on the edge of the blacked out billboard, perfectly content in the shadows.

His eyes roam over the scene again from a newer perspective, up above them.

The city from up here is alive, more so than the five blocks back where Peter usually tromps around on the roofs. There’s railroad tracks down the street, and the (overwhelming) smells of the city below are muted. Twinkling lights from apartments and office buildings blink back at Peter, watching him too.

Gotham *does* feel alive, in a sense. Queens felt like he could know her, talk to her. Gotham, on the other hand, feels like he would never truly understand her, because he’s not from here. He just hopes that she takes a liking to him.

Red Robin sighs and sets down the cat at Batman’s murmur. The cat curls up on the ground lazy as can be, tail twitching idly. The younger vigilante sits down on the edge of the building, almost mirroring Peter’s own sitting position. Peter is much more relaxed than the other, one knee brought up to support his chin, his arm tucked around it to hold it close. Red Robin sits up straight, both hands next to him and feet against the wall of the building as if ready to jump at a moment’s notice.

Batman sits next to Red Robin the same way. They could be related, Peter thinks, just based on body language alone. That, and/or have worked together for a long time. There is a short distance that Batman tries to make up for by leaning towards the younger, just ever so slightly. If he wasn’t Peter, he wouldn’t have noticed it.

Peter recognizes a stakeout when he sees one. He’s been on plenty himself before, waiting for Black Cat to strike. She’s never really set herself up as going for the most expensive heist- at least, not yet, since she’s learning-, but she *does* like to get *creative* with how she steals and what she steals. So Peter ends up doing a lot of stake outs in weird places every time he catches wind of something she might like to grab.

He understands why they chose this spot- they're just far enough out of sight that no one else could see them if they were looking up from the street, but they have the advantage of seeing the street in front of them and the two side streets crossing through it.

However, Peter hasn't really staked out a place like *this* before. It's a far cry from where Black Cat would strike, and is more like where some folks would hang out if they were looking for trouble. In front of the building they're camped out at, there's a sketchy looking bar with blacked out windows on the third and fourth stories. The fifth story has lights on and no black out curtains, save for one room on the far right.

He wonders who they're waiting for here. Is it one of the city's various rogues? Who was it that is out and about again...? Two-Face, for sure. He's heard about some Killer Croc guy... and Firefly. That's the one someone was saying they were worried about being in public spaces for because he's prone for setting bombs.

Doesn't seem like a Killer Croc would choose this place, it's not exactly the sewers or deviously crowded. Maybe Firefly is known to frequent the bar? He's not a meta from what Peter hears, just an arsonist. But if it's a rogue, he'd count on that Two-Face guy. But it's not like they *only* take down rogues, so there could be someone else down there. Oh- maybe a gang? Mafia? Peter has heard a few stories in passing. Benny mentioned a Black Mask at dinner the other night.

Peter settles that thought to the back of his mind and watches Batman, trying to get a sense of who the Bat is outside of rumors and distant footsteps in the shadows.

He's heard that Batman can be ruthless, that he doesn't kill but can leave someone so much worse. He's heard that people think *he's* secretly a meta, secretly a vampire, secretly secretly secrets. No one can get a read on what Batman is like outside of his appearances for fights, unless saved by him personally. But even then, they'd say he was intimidating, he was like seeing the night. But Peter is watching him now, and he's...

Batman is awkward.

That's Peter's first *real* impression of the guy. Red Robin is semi-relaxed (or as relaxed as these two can be, apparently? Whatever it is, it's showing that he's more comfortable than Bats is). And it's not like Batman is showing off tells of being uncomfortable. He's not shifting around, his gaze is set on one spot, and he's not clearing his throat.

It's a suspicion at first. It's sort of like watching Sam try to think of something to talk about with Peter that isn't hero-related stuff. It's when Batman opens his mouth that Peter's suspicion is confirmed.

"There is something I wanted to ask you."

Red Robin tenses, an almost imperceptible movement. Peter winces in sympathy.

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing anything in November?"

Almost all of the tension leaves Red Robin, and he cracks a small grin. Peter tilts his head, curious of the reaction. What was Red Robin thinking he'd ask? "No, I'll be free. I know that Spoiler and Signal have been talking about going somewhere the first week of December, I can help them crack down any open cases before they leave."

"Hm." Is Batman's first reply. Then, added as if trying not to back out: "You don't have to do that."

Red Robin finally tears his eyes away from the street below and towards Batman in confusion. "I... know?"

"I meant that..." Geez, is this how the Big Bad Bat acts when he's not in a fight, or...? "Well, there's a skateboarding competition in November. It's in Tampa. You had been planning to go last year, but..."

The silence grows between them for a long time. Almost too long. Peter tries not to wince at how long Red Robin is leaving Batman out to dry here, but it's hard not to. What happened last year that Red Robin couldn't go to the competition? Also- Red Robin skateboards? That's kinda cool, actually. Peter wants to try skateboarding but Tony and Pepper keep saying that Peter's insane balance might not transfer to wheels. Which is stupid, but whatever. When Red Robin doesn't say anything, Batman speaks again.

"I can get two tickets. Nightwing already assured me he would be in Gotham."

"Oh?"

Batman clears his throat. "We could go for the week."

"You- You want to go?" And wow, it sounds like Batman doesn't have a lot of fun. Red Robin sounds like he's heard the man say something bizarre, like that he wants to use puppies and rainbows for his next Batmobile aesthetic. It sounded normal to Peter. Guy wants to go hang out with his... teammate? Kid? Gotta be his kid. Maybe.

"Yes."

"...It would be just us?"

"Yes."

Red Robin looks back at the street, as if he's actually having to think it over. If this was Peter, he would have already said "*Hell yes!*" if Tony had offered. He'd be bouncing around trying to think of where they can go for an entire week, just them. But Red Robin is hesitant, like he doesn't know what to do with it.

There's a history here Peter isn't aware of, he thinks. What was supposed to just be a fun moment of stalking and maybe learning what they had on him turned into Peter being an eavesdropping eavesdropper. This is a little too personal for Peter to be listening in on...

He should go, maybe?

Yeah, he should go. There might be another Bat out tonight that Peter can stalk. Peter stands up to do just that when Red Robin speaks again.

“Did Nightwing ask you to do this?”

“No.”

The answer is very fast, very short and determined. It’s a *lot* for just one word. Peter pauses, not managing to uproot his feet but able to tear his eyes away from where they are. He observes the alley way from here, watches a distant train go by.

Why isn’t he moving?

“He doesn’t know about it. Not yet, anyway. I imagine I would have to tell him that.” Batman assures Red Robin. “It was my idea. I saw the competition was coming up, and I remembered what you said about wanting to go. I... want to go with you. It’s been too long since we did something as just us.”

“It- Not *that* long. We sat together yesterday.”

“We *worked* together yesterday. We *work* together a lot. What I meant was that it’s been too long since it was just us, doing something outside of work. Or outside of Gotham.” Red Robin’s lack of reply must scare Batman off, because he starts to retract his statement. “If you... do not want to g-”

“I do.” Red Robin sits up straighter, his full attention on Batman. The older vigilante has also turned his eye away from the street. The only indication that they are still focused on the bar they’re staking out is that they turn their heads ever so slightly every couple of seconds. “I do, I- I would like to go. I just... I mean, I didn’t expect that... I didn’t think you would *want* to go to something like that. Or... I don’t know.”

“You didn’t think I would want to spend time with you.”

OUCH. Peter and Red Robin both wince.

“That’s not-”

“I’m sorry.” Batman interrupts, and Red Robin promptly shuts his mouth. “That would be my fault. After everything... We were close, when you were Robin. The beginning was rough, but you... You are my son, and I should never have let it get this bad.”

“B, are you feeling okay?” The words almost fall out of Red Robin’s mouth.

“I’m learning to apologize.” Batman doesn’t rise to the deflection. For some reason, this makes Red Robin grin. Inside joke, Peter supposes. “Time has not been kind to us. You were alone for far too long, shouldering a weight on your own that you should never have had to hold. I don’t want you to feel like you are alone anymore. I missed you. I feel like I still miss you, even when you’re next to me.”

He misses Red Robin's reaction to that. He misses what they say next to each other. Peter sucks in a short breath, closing his eyes and trying to muffle the sounds of the world. It's too much like how Tony spoke to Peter- in a more direct way than Tony had said it, sure, but... It's the same sentiment.

"I don't want you to feel alone."

He grits his teeth, shaking his head and taking a step back, his back almost pressed against the billboard now. Red Robin is smiling, and Batman is ruffling his hair, and Peter wishes he hadn't come out to watch them anymore. He doesn't know why- something about the scene strikes him as *too* frustrating. Too annoying.

He wouldn't admit it, but he was hoping Batman would turn out to be a huge jerk. Someone Peter wouldn't be comfortable working with, someone that Peter *should* avoid. He wanted to have a damn good reason that he isn't asking for their help. He wanted the no meta rule to make sense, along with Batman being this evil guy who would never work with Peter.

Now, it makes Peter feel childish to want to hold back like he is, planning out his escape. To want to *be* alone, and figure this out *alone*. And it's all stupid Batman's fault because he's trying to connect with his son, trying to show him he's not alone, and that he cares.

Seriously, this guy sucks.

And is *so* confusing.

Peter barely holds back making a noise to voice his displeasure and he takes off.

He doesn't want to watch anymore, there's nothing valuable that he's getting. He tries and tries to place what it is that has him so worked up as he lands in an alley behind the building and stuffs his hands in his jacket.

look it

He doesn't get the time to think about it. His head snaps to the left.

He's in a long section of buildings whose back doors face each other. On the other side are restaurants and buildings that face out towards the street, and where Peter just came from were apartments. There's some scattered dumpsters (the smell is so repugnant that Peter is breathing shallowly), and a couple of alley cats.

Nothing interesting catches his eye, but he stands in wait. There's a couple seconds where Peter is wondering if the cats were the reason for the warning bells going off- they do look mighty hungry enough to chase a skinny 14 year old human(ish)- but then a door bursts open and a group of people come tumbling out.

A woman hits the ground, a choked sound escaping her. She lands halfway in a puddle and it takes seconds before a large woman is yanking the other girl up by her hair. *"Guess we'll show you who you're cheating."*

There's a gaggle of others with them, six from Peter's count. One of them is smoking a joint, a few hold their own beer cans, watching the scene as if watching two kids play fight. Peter takes three steps forward before he remembers:

He's not wearing his suit.

Cursing his own damn decision, Peter observes the alley and its inhabitants again. He could go break it up- the woman lets out a whimper as a knife is pulled- but he's still very obviously going to get caught if he does that. Batman and Red Robin are literally just a roof away, and any second they could swoop in and Peter will be forced to find out what happens to metas here.

But then again... There's a Bat and a Robin on the rooftop above.

Peter doesn't think twice, he doesn't have the time for that. He takes off down the alley the opposite direction of the attackers and their victim, then skirts a fast right again down another alley about five buildings down. He makes it look like he's just come around the corner from the road and he starts his way through the crowd of people on the street. His ears strain to keep track of where the woman is, his spidey sense hissing in his ear.

It doesn't take much to make it look like Peter is in a rush, because he *is*. He hurries without actually breaking into a run, glancing down the buildings to check where he's going.

watching watching watching

When Peter knows they've spotted him, he ducks into the correct alley. And then he breaks out into a run, trying to get closer in case they try to stop him. He hears the softest patter of feet following him from above just as he comes to a stop in front of the attack.

It was about thirty seconds, and Peter is so thankful that the knife hadn't been used yet- at least, not on the woman's skin. Her hair has been cut, brown locks in the puddle and a hand clasped over her mouth. Peter stands there almost, like, dumbly, because he hadn't thought this far ahead, and all eyes land on him.

"Tha fuck's a kid doin' here?" One of the men laugh.

"Go on, brat. Git outta here." Another waves his hand, but someone else grabs his wrist and shakes his head, a grin spreading on his face.

"Nah, wait, this could be fun. Don' this chick got a kid at home?"

Oh, shit.

Alright, not expected. He hadn't thought this through, but he can handle it.

Peter takes a step back, making the mistake of locking eyes with the woman. She's horrified, her eyes wide and she manages to get her mouth free from under that hand and shouts at Peter in such a desperate voice he'll remember it for years.

"Run!"

One step back from Peter.

Three steps forward from one of the guys in the group.

And one bright figure drops in between them, grabbing the man's wrist and yanking him down onto the ground in a swift and exact movement.

Red Robin presses his foot onto the man's back, pulling his arm back at a painful angle. The man yelps and attempts to get free only for it to make the hold hurt worse. The larger woman who had the woman in her grasp lets go and makes a run for it to the left. Her friends have the same idea. They all tuck tails and scatter, Joint pushing through the door and Beer Number One slipping on the steps to get up.

Knife doesn't get but a couple feet away. A dark shadow falls over the alley, and boots collide with concrete. She runs straight into a kevlar vest and bounces back, unable to catch herself and slipping on the wet concrete.

Psycho (the one who was going to get Peter involved, fuck *that* guy in particular) is unconscious on the ground. Two more follow suit and Peter unfreezes as the fight unfolds. He grabs the victim's cold hands and drags her away from the fight, kneeling down on the ground in front of her and shielding her from the others, his back facing them.

"What're you still doin' here!?" She shouts at him, but she's holding so tight to his hand as if he'll disappear.

"Are you injured?" He asks, but he's already started checking. Her head seems fine, there's no blood. Her hair isn't in the same state, half of it is chopped off in large chunks. Her cheek is mottled with harsh red marks from repeated blows, her nose is dripping blood and a steady stream of tears run down her cheeks.

"You-You shoulda ran!"

"I don't know if you noticed-" There's a shout and one of the men hits the nearest dumpster and there's a crack sound that Peter didn't need advanced hearing to notice. "-but Batman and Red Robin are here."

"But you- you didn't *run*."

"Run and leave you there?" Peter takes both her hands in his. She's not actually all that much older than Peter, she's probably around 17, maybe 18. She's shaking all over and Peter doesn't believe she's aware that she is. "Not a chance."

She shakes her head, blinking tears away. "Yer crazy... *Thank* you."

Peter hopes his grin comes off as assuring- it's easier in the mask, where people can imagine he's smiling and comforting. She ducks her head onto his shoulder and he sets one hand on her shoulder. "It's gonna be alright now. You're okay, just take a deep breath. Focus on my breathing."

She does, albeit it takes a minute. When she's got the hang of it, Peter chances a glance over his shoulder. Batman and Red Robin are standing over four people, zip-tying each of their wrists. Two got away during the scatter, the fucking weasels. Peter will try to remember their faces for later. The woman is still trembling like she's violently cold.

"Do you really got a kid at home?" Peter returns his attention to her.

She blinks at him, not expecting the question. Then she nods. "M-My son, Noah."

"How old is he?"

"He- Two. He's gonna be two, in a few days."

"What? Really?" Peter sits rather than kneels now. Her heartbeat is still erratic, but she's making her way towards calm enough. "That's fantastic! You know, a lot of people say that, it's like, what it's called? The terrible twos? I think that's bogus, 'cause I had a foster sibling once who was around that age, and she was the sweetest angel ever."

This gets a chuckle out of her. "Noah's always so calm."

watching

hello!

Peter looks up as the shadow falls over them. Batman watches them for a couple of seconds, a curious tilt to his head that's almost not there at all. He kneels down in front of them both, hunching his shoulders, trying to make himself smaller.

He hasn't gotten a chance to see Batman up close, even with the stalking a few minutes ago. The cowl makes it impossible to tell what he's thinking, so Peter has to rely on body language. Even then, it's like he purposefully covers it up, so no one can read him. He's definitely looking at Peter though, he can feel the man's eyes watching him, but it *looks* like he's watching the woman.

"There is a clinic nearby that can treat your wounds, if you would rather not take an ambulance." His voice is much gruffer than when he was speaking to Red Robin, but not harsh either.

"I-I'm really not hurt. My nose isn't broken." She sits up fully, still holding Peter's hands. She makes eye contact with Batman for a second, looks away, then tries again a couple times.

"They will help you for free, courtesy of Wayne."

"I'll be okay. Thank you, Batman. And Red Robin too," She finds it easier to look over Peter's shoulder at the other vigilante. "I just want to get home."

"I'll take you." Red Robin offers. Peter stands up, careful to go slow to help the woman stand with him. "I want to make sure you get home safe, if that's alright."

"I..." She hesitates, then looks right at Peter. "Will you be alright?"

Peter wasn't expecting the question. "Of course." He replies easily. "There's Batman right here. Unless one of the many psychos of the city pop up out of that dumpster, I think it's generally safe."

"Generally?" She prompts, a small smile on her lips.

"There's never a 100% chance." Peter shrugs.

She laughs then, and Peter is grateful for it. It's not a hearty thing, but it's simple enough that it means she's actually doing okay. "I- Alright. You take care, hear me? And next time, *run*."

"Uh huh, sure." Peter nods placatingly, cause ain't no way he's doing that. When she lets go of Peter's hands and follows Red Robin down the alley, Batman follows the movement between them. There's a shared glance between the vigilantes that Peter pretends not to notice.

With a wave goodbye, the woman and Red Robin are taking off using his grapple, leaving just Peter and Batman standing there.

Awkwardly.

Quietly.

Peter hates the quiet.

Peter puts his hands in his pockets and starts to whistle a little tune. He thinks it's the Wild Krattz theme song, but he's not quite sure. Sue him, he's got a lot on his mind. Batman's full attention snaps towards him.

"...Are you hurt?"

"Nah." Peter shakes his head smally. Batman's lips are pressed into a thin line.

"She was right. That was incredibly reckless of you not to run away. You could have been injured, or worse. What if we hadn't been here to help? Your family would have lost you."

As if Peter hadn't gotten this same type of lecture before. *Why were you out walking, Peter? Where's your family, Peter? You could have gotten hurt, Peter. What if we hadn't been here? What if, what if what if.*

What if Peter hadn't been here to help that woman? What if he had just stayed inside, and in another life, Noah never got to grow up with his mom?

And another thing- *Batman* knows damn well that Peter doesn't have family like that.

"You *were* here to help. So I guess we won't know." Peter grins up at him- probably a spiteful little thing, too much like he's being an asshole for no reason. Happy swears he picked it up from Tony, but Peter's always been something of a brat, in his opinion.

There's a few seconds where Batman doesn't reply. Peter fills it in.

“Well, Mr. Batman,” Peter heaves out a dramatic sigh. “I should get goin’. Got places to be, other fights to walk into, y’know how it is.” He goes to take a step towards where he was pretending to go earlier when he just ‘stumbled’ across the fight, but Batman reaches out to stop him. He doesn’t block Peter in or touch him, but Peter stops anyway.

“I’ll bring you home. What is your address?”

Peter searches Batman’s face for a few seconds, then raises a brow. For all of Batman’s intimidating nature, for all of the fact that he’s a large, likely deadly man who just chooses not to kill, and the fact that his entire vigilante identity rides on being a force of nature to be reckoned with...

hello! safe worried safe equal

Spidey-sense is content with Batman’s presence. In fact, greeting him like he’s a *friend*. It says a lot, and Peter is sure he’ll have to figure out *why* later. All of the vigilantes he’s meeting just scream ‘safe.’ It’s driving him crazy.

Why can’t they give him a reason? Why can’t they just *leave him alone*? Why can’t they hurry up and prove that Peter has to do this alone? It’s so frustrating- it’s so fresh, this aggravation. He wants to tell Batman to fuck off, but the man has done nothing wrong. That’s also the problem- he’s done nothing wrong. Peter has no good reason to be so wary, he has no reason to be afraid, he has to reason *not* to ask for help.

You asked for help with Him. No one came.

You would have died.

~~*You should have died.*~~

Adults will always disappoint you.

And yet.

safe...

“Come on, Mr. Batman, don’t play that game. Don’t you already know?” Peter doesn’t really think about the challenge in his words before he says it. But it’s out in the open, all Batman has to do is admit-

“Why would I?”

Hah! Peter was wondering if Batman would call him out. Surely the amount of times Peter accidentally looked his way while Batman was stalking him *had* to have been noticed. Batman’s pretty smart to avoid falling into that. But Peter’s smart too. He can play that game, if that’s what the man is wanting to do.

“Red Hood brought me back home the other night. Ain’t he a Bat too?”

“He may have mentioned bringing someone home a few nights ago. But I still do not know your address.” Huh. He didn’t *answer* Peter’s question. He answered it in a ‘sorta to the left’ way. Bastard. He’s good at this. There’s more to that, too, that Peter doesn’t know. Peter resists the urge to narrow his eyes, to ask questions and be nosy.

“It’s only a couple blocks from here.”

“Are your parents aware you’re out this late? It’s nearly 12AM.”

“Lemme just hop over to the cemetery and ask when my curfew is. I’m sure they’d *die* if I told them about this.” Peter relishes in the way Batman’s lips draw tight again. He shrugs and huffs, waving it off. “Gee, Mr. Batman, you look like you ate a lemon.”

“I wasn’t trying to-”

“I know, I know, I was just making a joke.” Peter says lightly. “I don’t have any folks. My foster dad is out of town. What they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“But it could hurt *you*. ”

“Maybe.” Peter agrees. “But I guess that’d be on me. Y’know, my responsibility and all that. I’d make my bed and I’d lie in it.”

“Hn.”

For some reason, Peter can’t contain his grin at that response. It felt like an accomplishment to get that out of him instead of actual words. And once he gets the ball rolling, it’s hard to stop. “Hey, do you have echolocation in your suit?”

“No.” Batman is pressing someone on the wrist of his suit.

“Why not?”

“Hadn’t thought about it.”

“You should. You’re a bat. That’s like, their thing. You think of a bat and you go, ‘yeah, they echo locate.’ It’s basically, like, kind of part of the image. On standard alone you should have it.” Peter says thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’d be hard for you. You’ve got that handy dandy computer on your wrist- which I should point out is dangerous near your vital organs? But you do you I guess- and you got EMP shielding or something, right?”

Batman hesitates. He *hesitates*.

“You know that how?”

Gotcha!

“I saw it on Signal’s suit during one of his take downs the other day. I figured that’s a cool tool to have, so why wouldn’t you put it in other suits?” Peter rambles, elated to have gotten Batman a little freaked. “So if you can put *that* in your suit, why not an echo locator? It’d be

useful in situations where you have low visibility. I mean, all you'd really need is an advanced sound generator, a high quality microphone, signal processing--"

"You've really thought about this."

"Huh? No, I'm thinking about it now." Peter furrows his brow. "You also have like, electroshock or something, right? I heard some old lady talking about it on the train the other day. Have you thought about energy shielding--"

Peter's cut off by a dark form stopping in the road a few feet away.

"Holy shit, is that the Batmobile?"

He's over there in seconds (probably a little too fast, based on the way Batman is watching him, but not enough that it would say anything), eyes shining as he gets a look at the Batmobile for the first time.

Stupidly named or not, it's *incredible*. None of Tony's cars look this cool (even if Peter likes those cars and can name every single one he has), because Iron Man thinks it's "tacky" to have a vehicle for this purpose. They have jets and planes and all sorts of other modes of transportation.

The back almost looks like a Fiat Turbina, and the rest of it is smooth and low like a Chevrolet Impala- but it's got a lot of hidden specials that Peter is itching to get closer to, he can *tell* they're there. The car is sturdier than it should be, a bit more bulky to keep it all hidden from sight. It's likely that this thing is built to get into even the worst of crashes without so much as a scratch. The tinted windows gleam in the lights of the street, all shiny and pretty and-

"Unfair that this this beauty belongs to you, old man."

Batman huffs under his breath in something that could be a laugh, walking to the driver's side of the car. There's a moment where nothing happens, then the handle on the passenger side brightens with a small screen. The door unlocks and pops open itself, gliding up and outwards to reveal an even *cooler* inside with leather seats and a fuck ton of buttons Peter is going to *not* press. Batman is already sitting inside, as if the jerk expects Peter to sit his ass down no problem.

Oh, this could definitely be a kidnapping. And as loathe as he is to admit this... Peter is risking it for this car.

He hops right on in, the doors closing when he buckles his seat belt. He looks over the dashboard eagerly, attempting to keep his hands from doing grabby '*must push button*' motions that Tony constantly bats his hands away for doing. "Is that for the grappling hook launchers?" He points to a button near him.

"I'm not telling you that."

“So it *is*. ” Peter hums as the car revs to life. Batman didn’t press a key to the ignition, nor did Peter see any particular activation. *Cool...* “Do you have a Batmissle?”

Batman ignores that question. “Address?”

“Benny’s, 5 blocks over.” Peter says fast. “Batshield?”

“The burger restaurant?”

“Yes. Does everything have Bat in front of it? If so, please tell me that’s not your fault.”

-

Batman did answer the last question. A lot of his equipment does, in fact, have Bat in front of it. No, it is not his fault. Peter can blame Nightwing for that.

Interesting that he answered that and nothing else. Interesting that he returned Peter to Benny’s and did *not* kidnap him, even though it would have been deemed easy for him to do so. Interesting that Peter can’t figure out if he’s annoyed at Batman or not still.

Interesting interesting interesting... All of that managed to keep Peter up far later than he should have. But whatever, what’s done is done.

He woke up the next morning and did his best to push all of that aside to worry about later. He got... something? Out of that interaction? He takes a shower, dresses in his warmest clothes because there’s a slight chill in the air that threatens to get colder during the day, eats breakfast with Benny downstairs (eggs and toast, with strawberry jam and not grape because he isn’t an animal), and settled into this room to draw up plans for the Jumping Radar.

It’s a relatively quiet day outside (a curse of road rage only every hour or so instead of thirty minutes), and Peter manages to focus long enough to get his prototype one finished.

It’s nothing special, but it has a charm to it that Peter likes to see. He tried to make it match the nanobracelet that Peter got from Tony, if just to make his tech look like it belongs together, but there’s only so much that a junkyard part could look like a lab-made Stark Tech. It’s light enough that it can go under his jacket sleeve no problem, and it only opens if Peter uses his thumbprint.

He *should* test it...

He hesitates to do so. He got lucky last night with Batman being more chill than he could have been. The man was biting back a lecture about the dangers of the streets the entire time Peter was alone with him. Peter likely goaded him too much, got on his nerves just enough, that Batman might not be *as* nice if he caught Peter again.

And because Peter had shown he was back to wandering Gotham at night, he’ll likely get at least one Bat swooping by Benny’s, and they might keep an eye out for him.

Deciding that going during the daytime would be better, lest he get another lecture from a Bat, Peter hid the Jumping Radar in his backpack, tied his shoes, and left Benny’s in a hurry.

There's a tingling at the back of his neck he can't place a name to yet, so he chooses to keep his head down as he walks around.

The mental map of Gotham is growing stronger day by day. It's very different to Queens, but not *that* different. There's old courts where people play basketball together (even though they have barbed wire over the fences), and there are hot dog vendors (who carry shotguns on their hip), and even a bodega.

That... didn't have a cat inside, so Peter decided not to trust it.

Gotham is just... weird. That's all he can really put it as. There's the mix of people that are just trying to survive, and people who are *desperate* to survive, and then the greedy on top of it. It's not dissimilar to how life always is, it's just *amplified* here.

Peter supposes it's the presence of organized crime just as much as the sheer amount of wack villains running around. They don't get much of that in Queens lately, because Peter had been cracking down on it. And not as many people turned to gangs for an effort to survive when the Avengers were constantly out in New York helping people do so.

It's been nine days now in this universe, and Peter has been involved in and seen more crime than he would have in a little over a week in his universe. He had to pass by someone stealing the tires off of a postal truck with the post guy still *inside the truck* just to get out of the house.

Peter had first appeared in the University District, right outside of Gotham hospital and nearby Gotham Public Library. Over the days, he had avoided the Bowery and Crime Alley, sensing just how bad it could get in there. *Stay away stay away stay away* his senses told him.

This meant that Peter had ended up in the Upper East Side. Benny's is there, and while it isn't the *best* place to be, it's certainly not the worst. A few days ago, he had explored to the middle of the island that Gotham is, towards Robinson Park, and then down towards the Diamond District. These are far better off than the other places, and that had to be due to more police presence in the area.

Which is something of a false identity. Because Peter already knew this, but apparently it's doubled in Gotham: the cops are corrupt.

So what Peter should say? The area *appears* far better off than the other places, but he should be wary of every interaction he has.

He looks up at the tallest building in Diamond District, standing in a small square to get his bearings. *Wayne Industries* says the side, and Peter is struck with a sense of dejavu.

That's the name of the man in the first article that Peter saw about Gotham, when he first got here. "Bruce Wayne" and something about his green-energy initiative, that was apparently more exciting for people to know about than the *mayor* that was assassinated. Batman had almost mentioned him last night, something about him paying for medical care, so people can get assistance for free.

Huh...

Peter squints at the building in thought. This Wayne guy must be a millionaire or a billionaire, like Tony is. This isn't the first time he's heard of Wayne's name, it's got to be the hundredth. He passes by bus-stops with this guy's face on them, he has billboards, he's on the side of hospitals. He's as rooted in Gotham as the crime is, just on the opposite side. Peter's seen more about *him* than he has for who the new mayor is going to be.

It reminds him of Tony again, and Peter can't help but frown. Each day that passes, Peter is more and more eager to get back. If only... *here* If... *hey* only...

...here right here... hey here...

Peter scans the crowd, turning in a circle with his hands in his pockets. He can tell that something is nearby but what- No. *Someone*. It's not even a question as to who, he knows that feeling now. Peter turns again, searching, scanning for a hint of that face-

there!

Getting pushed out of the Wayne Industry tower, the man that Peter has been searching for flings a suitcase at the windows, cussing up a storm. A flurry of papers scatter across the walkway and Gotham's finest citizens desert the area without even looking up at him.

He steels himself as he pushes through the crowd. What is he doing *here*, of all places? Peter had thought he'd find the man hiding in some warehouse, not out in the open wearing a barely-hanging-on suit and tie. The sleeve around the man's wrist is bumpy, Peter can tell he has the device on his arm. The man's suitcase has spilled onto the ground, and a security guard is in his face, red like a tomato from yelling, and his heart beat is more like-

scared?

"Don't come back, or you're getting arrested!"

"This isn't fair! Let me in, I have an appointment!"

"From two days ago!"

"And so what if I missed it? Tell him to make the time to see me!"

"Get outta here!"

He *is* trying to get tech or something! Wayne Industries is different from Wayne Enterprises, even if it's the same company. Why else would the man come here, if not for tech? That's why he attacked Peter, that *has* to be it! He was after Tony the entire time. Though, now he's out here actually making appointments rather than stealing Bruce Wayne's kids. Peter feels a little jealous about *that*.

Peter pushes past a few people, barely muttering out his sorries, but no one cares. He keeps his eyes trained on the old man as he picks up his suitcase, locked out of the tower for good. He roughly stuffs the papers inside and snaps the suitcase shut, stalking down the street and

pulling at his hair. The man's three piece suit is in shambles, half of it buttoned on the wrong button and his tie too loose.

angry... danger... careful... crazy...

Yeah, even without his spider-senses telling him, Peter gets that impression. He has to approach this carefully. He shouldn't start a fight, not yet. It's way too crowded in the streets, he doesn't have a mask, and the Jumping Radar hasn't been tested yet. Instead... Yeah, instead, Peter should track down where this guy has been coming and going. He *has* to have a home, or a base of operations or something. Maybe if Peter can get inside, he can get more information on that wrist piece.

A woman with a poodle gets in his way, and Peter scoots around them, trying not to take his eyes off of the man. He's taller than Peter remembered, but maybe it's because he isn't as hunched down?

"-good for nothings- will be sorry- boss-" The man is raving under his breath, clicking his tongue every few seconds. There's an almost hissing noise that escapes him. Peter doesn't like the sound of that.

A bus hisses next to Peter's ear, the steam getting in his face. He skips around it to find the man is getting farther and farther down the street. Peter curses, picking up the pace. He doesn't want to alert the man that he's nearby, but what if he loses him?

It's when Peter passes by an alley that things start to go wrong.

...in there!

He hesitates, his feet stopping in the middle of the alley. He glances to his left, not spotting anything at first. He looks at the man's back, watching his form getting smaller the farther he gets. It must have been a fluke, nothing-

"-fine and dandy." A girl's voice groans. *"Doesn't hurt at all. Take your time getting here."*

Shit. Shit shit shiiiiit.

Peter runs a hand through his hair. He takes a step forward to go after the man, gritting his teeth as he does so, but his foot hangs mid-step in the air. The guilt starts to eat at him, crawling it's way up inside him.

Peter wants to go *home*.

But he can't...

As the man turns the corner down the block, Peter gives in. He turns into the alley.

When he gets closer to the dumpster in the alley, he spots a purple boot sticking out from behind it. He can smell the copper of blood before he even sees the person, and he holds back a wince. He peers around the corner, slow and deliberate.

Another Bat. *Spoiler* he remembers. The girl-woman? He can't tell her age. She's curled over her side, a hand over a knife that had been stuck in a weak spot of her body armor. Her hand trembles as she tries to keep pressure.

It's rare that he sees the Bats in daylight, other than Signal. They stick to the night, when the crime is at its worst. Which means that one of their Bad Guys is out and about, causing all kinds of mayhem, and there wasn't a Gotham alert gone out (Apparently, the city has alarms, like tornado alarms, that ring out in a section of city where rogues appear). But he hasn't heard anything about it, and his spider-sense is just a low hum...

Well, not that that means anything. The city is so infested with crime, that Peter's spider-sense is pretty much always going off in some way. He might have missed it because he was so focused on catching his *own* villain.

But that doesn't matter now. *Spoiler* is hurt, and Peter can't leave her here.

He slings his backpack around and unzips it, alerting her to his presence. Her head snaps up and she reaches for her utility belt, only to pause when she sees Peter. He pulls out a white and red box, zips up his backpack, and sets it on the ground as he kneels in front of her.

"*Kid, what?*" She has a voice modulator too, but it's a lot more present in her voice than it was for Red Hood. Her entire face is hidden by a black mask over the lower half of her face, a domino mask over her eyes, and a purple cloak with a hood. Blood stains the inside of the cloak and her side, pooling beneath her.

"I don't have any purple bandages to match the aesthetic." Peter comments as he pops the first aid kit open. "Hope that won't be a problem."

She lets out a soft laugh. "...*Nah, I don't think it will be.*"

Peter scoots closer, assessing the wound itself. It doesn't look like it went in too deep, but it's lodged in there mostly because of the armor. He scrunches his nose in distaste- he hates stab wounds, always will, but it'd be weirder if he liked them. He takes out a rag from the first aid kit.

"*D'you just carry that around?*"

"No, not at all. I just happened to have one on me today. Had a feeling I'd stumble across a vigilante with a stab wound." Peter replies, raises a brow at her as he presses the rag to her side. He's careful not to jostle the knife.

"*Smart idea.*" *Spoiler* mumbles. "*Hey, you know, m' friends have seen you around.*"

Peter stares at her. "Yeah, I know. You guys are just falling out of the sky 'round here. You should look into that. If I didn't know that vigilantes had better things to do with their time, I'd be suspicious that I have a few stalkers."

Spoiler doesn't have anything to say to that. "*One of them is on his way, so I'll be good.*"

“I’m not leaving you with a stab wound until I hand you off to someone who can get you to a doctor.” He wonders if she might be crazy or something.

“How do y’ know about first aid?”

“I know enough to know you can’t leave someone whose been stabbed in a back alley next to a dumpster.” Peter dodges the question.

“Why are you helping?”

“What kind of stupid question is that?” Peter is almost offended. He scowls at her, reminding himself that Gotham is just insane. The lady last night had been appalled that Peter hadn’t ran for it just to save himself. He supposes that’s how it is here- to live, a person has to look out for just themselves. The first sign of danger, they turn away.

And while it makes sense, and he can’t fault them for living that way... It’s just not what he was taught.

“Geez, you people are so *weird*, I’ll tell you that. If I *can* help someone, and then I *don’t* help them, then wouldn’t that make me a jerk?”

Spoiler mutters something unintelligible.

“Hey, don’t pass out,” Peter snaps his free hand in front of her face, her head slumping forward and rising again. “I’m not removing your mask because I’m such a nice person, but you better not have a concussion under there. Blood loss is bad enough.”

behind

Peter doesn’t have to fake look over his shoulder, because Red Robin drops to the ground a little more harshly than he should have. His ankles are probably going to hurt later because of that, but he doesn’t seem to care.

He backs away to give him room to kneel down in front of her. Red Robin doesn’t look surprised to see Peter, so he’s guessing Spoiler’s comm was on. He’s entirely focused on her, his hands gripping her wrist to check for a pulse.

“Hey, Spoiler, you with me?”

“Hey, boyf...” Spoiler mutters. Red Robin lets out a short sigh of relief.

Now that Peter isn’t seeing him in the dark and from afar, he can get more detail about Red Robin. He has black hair that falls in his face, a black domino mask with a hint to the bat symbol on the ends. What stands out the most is that this is the youngest Robin he’s seen so far, just a few years older than Peter. Maybe just about to turn 18, or a little older. His black cloak falls over his shoulder, and his hands are gentle when he lifts Spoiler.

He fully steps out of Red Robin’s way as the older guy shifts to a fireman’s carry, careful not to jostle her wound. He nods briefly to Peter, but he’s more worried about his friend than some kid.

"See ya, kid. Thnks..." Spoiler slurs, and they're off.

Peter waves goodbye.

He stands in the alley for a moment, looking at the blood she left behind. She'll be okay... And Peter... Peter should try to figure out where that man went. But he has a feeling that he's long gone by now, and he missed his chance.

-

"You stabbed."

The next morning after Steph faced off an angry Two-Face and had to scam because he got that lucky shot in finds Steph laying in bed and trying to heal, a revolving door of visitors constantly checking on her.

Steph can't hold back a sheepish grin as Cass settles down in the seat next to her bed. On the other side, Tim is muttering to himself and writing in his notebook with a dangerous fury. He hasn't gotten much sleep, but last night he was being overprotective again and wouldn't calm down about Steph's wound, so he's even more tired.

"Yeah," Steph signs back as she speaks. "I got stabbed."

"Being stupid?" Cass smirks, and Steph rolls her eyes.

"No, not this time."

Cass seems to have it in mind that Steph *likes* getting stabbed or something. It isn't her fault that people have knives. She already dreads the moment that she's all better and everyone makes her run through defense training again- especially Bruce, who's a stickler for that.

"What is Tim doing?" Cass asks, gesturing to Tim at the end. Steph sighs, and Tim doesn't show an indication that he's heard it.

"He's still stuck on Peter, but he's studying for class right now. I think." Steph tries to see his paper, but it's a bunch of nonsense. "Could be both?"

"Peter?" Cass spells out, and Steph realizes-no one must have filled her in before she got here.

Cass has been in Hong Kong, arriving to provide backup, what with the three rouges out and roaming the streets right now. She's mostly here to help Dick, who's been running back and forth between Gotham and Bludhaven for a few days now. But... that's going to change, considering Steph was stupid enough to let Two Face get the jump on her.

Well, she has a lot to get caught up on. Who better for that job than Steph?

"Peter is a boy that showed up at Babs' library." Steph explains (because she doesn't want to think about how she messed up, not yet, when the pain has only just dulled), and she

considers making a name sign for Peter so they don't have to spell it out. "He was covered in bruises, and according to her and Dick, it was pretty bad. Like someone tried to kill him."

"Boy?" Cass tilts her head. "Young?"

"Yeah, pretty young." Steph recalls Peter's face now that she's seen him up close, in person. She had seen him on their screens, had heard through word of mouth about him. But seeing him up close was different.

He's just a kid.

And yeah, she knows, it's sort of... Well, they aren't new to *that*, right? Kids getting injured, kids being lost, kids being homeless, kids... having no one to watch them. Every single one of them knows all too well about this.

But really, seeing him up close, it *hurt*. Maybe even more than the stab wound had.

He still has baby face. He's got these big brown eyes that look right through you and seem to *see* and notice everything. He's got freckles on those tan cheeks that prove he's *really* not from around here, because seriously, Gotham never sees the sun. Peter doesn't belong in a place like this, and Steph is really glad she hadn't seen the extent of the wounds the others were talking about.

Even though the thought makes her guilty, that she was glad that Peter was obviously hiding healing bruises on his neck and his cheek, because they weren't there even though they should be.

She had heard about his encounter with Batman the night before last. Tim had spoken about how he comforted the victim, that he didn't think to run. Bruce had been exasperated, but between his concerns about what Peter had done and said, he would grin when he recalled the boy's energy and excitement about the Batmobile and the like.

And honestly, it tracks. He had been so *calm* yesterday, despite the situation. Anyone else stumbling across a vigilante losing blood would have freaked out, or ran, or attacked. But Peter had taken control like nothing was that weird about the situation, tossing around jokes. Which Steph can appreciate.

She keeps thinking about her blood on his hand, though, when he was waving goodbye, and the humor is dulled.

"He might be 12 or a little older. He's a good kid, I think," Steph pauses, her mind still wandering back to his smile-frown that he had, trying to cheer her up and keep her calm even though *he* was a civilian kid, and she was a vigilante who's had far worse. "You should ask Bruce, Dick, and Jay about their encounters with him, he's... a character for sure. He found me before Tim could get to me and held my wound so I didn't bleed out."

Cass' eyebrows raise, and Steph grins up at her.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been bragging about it. He’s such a sweet kid! He even told me: ‘*If I can help you, and I don’t, then wouldn’t that make me a jerk?*’ And it was sooo cute, ‘cause he said it like helping was the most obvious thing in the world to do!” Her sister grins back at that, and Steph knew she’d appreciate the sentiment. “We can’t find anything on him, though. And by ‘we’ I mean Boyfie here.” Steph jerks a thumb at Tim. “And Babs and Bruce too, but they’re forced to focus on the rouges that got out.”

“*Can’t find anything?*” Cass is confused, pointing to Tim, who seems to know the conversation has shifted into prime complaining time for him, because he looks up. “*He, of all people, can’t find Peter?*”

“I’m *convinced* this kid didn’t exist before a few days ago, Cass.” Tim groans, setting his cheek on his notebook paper in a dramatic fashion. The two girls look at each other in exasperation, but smile nonetheless. “There’s nothing about *any* Peter in the foster system that looks like him, and all of the Tony’s that are foster dads that I found have no connection to Peter at all. The little details we have of him don’t match up either.”

“It’s driving him *nuts*.” Steph giggles into her hand, and winces as she feels the wound in her side protest. Cass and Tim frown, and Steph can sense the emotional distress from a mile away. She waves them off. “I’m *fine*. It’s just a little light stabbing, no biggie.”

“*I’ll take your patrols until you get better.*” Cass signs, and Steph reaches to squeeze her shoulder in appreciation. “*Anything I look out for?*”

“Peter.” Steph says, and Tim squints at her.

Steph gets that. She hadn’t been as involved in the Peter thing as he, Bruce, Jason, and Dick are. She was supposed to be focused on the rouges- actually, she and Damian, because lately, Bruce has been wanting Damian to work with her more often. Maybe it’s because when Bruce goes ~~stalking~~ checking on Peter, Damian gets frustrated just like Tim does, but with a little more Kick to it. She shrugs a little, drawing out a long sigh.

“What? I want to thank him, somehow. If she can figure out how to do that for me, that’d be great. It’s not like I can get suited up and do it now, so I have to wait. We all know I’m impatient like that.”

And there- right there. Cass and Steph both notice the gleam in Tim’s eyes. A familiar gleam that causes the both of them to tense up. Cass first, because she can always sense it before Tim can even think it.

“...You’re gonna stalk him as a civilian, aren’t you?” Steph narrows her eyes at him. He avoids her eyes, the idiot. “That’s *dangerous*, Tim.”

“How so?” He protests, not even denying that was what he’s thinking.

“Two reasons. For one: He could figure you out if you hang with him too long, he’s seen you in suit a couple times now. And two: because you’re gonna get close to him, and you’re gonna get *attached*, and he’s gonna end up here. And if he’s even *kinda* sort of good at fighting, or detective work- and you know, he *is* good with computers, enough that Babs was

impressed, so that would be a reason too- then you guys are gonna end up with another damn Robin. Damian isn't ready for there to be two Robins running around."

"That's not true." Tim argues, and it falls flat in front of them. "...Alright, maybe-"

"Knock knock!"

Dick knocks on the door and says it out loud, much to the annoyance of Tim and Steph. They both groan with complaint that dies out when he enters the room. Cass signs what they're all thinking.

"Zombie..."

"Hey, I saw that." Dick stops next to the bed, and Cass just grins at him, the perfect little angel that she is.

He looks more tired than Tim is, and that is a feat. His hair, usually a great source of pride for him, is half up and has a few flyaways as if he had pulled it out of his face in a hurry. The circles under his eyes were starting to get more pronounced.

It's no wonder why he's tired, the man really is getting split in two directions with Bludhaven and Gotham. Bludhaven is 33 minutes away, but it takes at least an hour and a half, sometimes two hours depending on traffic, to get through Gotham and then to Bristol, where the Manor is.

Steph, as much as she tried putting it off, is hit with a pang of guilt for getting injured. Cass was supposed to be here to help Dick out, and now she's taking up for Steph instead. Dick must sense the upcoming storm, because he reaches over and tucks her hair behind her ear with a smile.

"What's with the frowning? None of that, kay? We're all glad you're okay."

Steph can't argue against it, she knows it's futile. She simply smiles, leaning into his hand. He's really a good older brother to everyone he comes across. It's like he always knows when Steph is starting to feel bad, sometimes before she even notices it herself. His relationship with Tim got rocky recently, but they had some sort of talk, because now they're back to what it was before.

Or, maybe, better than they were before.

"Dick, did you just get here?" Tim is making his Revenge Face. Dick, too tired, misses this completely, and he shrugs.

"Yeah, but I had to stop by and check on Steph-"

Tim stands up, hopping over the foot of Steph's bed and scrambling to grab the man. Dick's eyes widen comically large, and he attempts to take a step back. It's too late, Tim already has him by the shirt. "Sleep. Now."

"Wait-"

“No waiting.” Tim argues, yanking him harder than he needs to. Dick stumbles, looking back for help only to find the two girls agreeing with Tim. It’s early in the morning, but Dick needs his rest, sleep schedule be-damned. “Sleep now.”

Steph and Cass can hear them wrestling in the hall, so Cass shuts the door.

-

Thanks to the set back (he can’t be mad about it, not when he knows that Spoiler is alive and he managed to help her, so maybe he shouldn’t call it a set back), Peter hadn’t seen the villain for the rest of that day. He attempted to track down where he could have gone after hitting that corner, but it was like the man up and vanished. Which...

Yeah.

He can do that.

So it’s very likely that he did.

Where *to* is still a mystery, and one that Peter is *going* to get to the bottom of. No more waiting for Spider-Man. It’s been *ten* entire days since he got here. That’s *more* than enough time for him to gain his bearings. He can’t sit on his ass all day and wait for this guy to stroll by again.

His current plan to get Spider-Man up and running is the same plan that he used all the time before he met Tony. “*Sneak into a school and steal.*” He’s pretty good at it, if he does say so himself.

Peter sticks close to a group of students as they make their way into the building. This is one of the better schools in Gotham, and he’s betting that they’ll have at least some- if not all- of what he needs to make his web fluid. He’s running way too low for his spidery needs, and he needs to stock pile.

He misses Tony’s lab right now just a little less than he misses Tony himself. If Peter was running out of web fluid, he could just walk into the lab and make a new supply that could last him weeks. And it’s times like these that he wishes he could biologically make web fluid, but also, he thinks, that would be gross.

Somehow, Peter manages not to stick out in the crowd of students. He got lucky that Gotham doesn’t care about uniforms as much as they could. Even with his clothes being a somewhat ratty and too big for him, he gets by based on heavy experience with this sort of thing. He hangs close to the walls and in groups, moving seamlessly as though he knows where he’s going. He’s just “off to class” like every other kid here, no need to freak that he could get caught. The longer that he’s here, the more clues he can pick up on where a lab might be, and more importantly, where some readily-available-but-not-*really*-chemicals might be waiting for him.

A group of older students on the stairs are talking about first period chemistry. *Bingo!*

Peter holds back a smirk as he fits behind their group on the stairs. No one even sends him a passing glance. Which could hurt his feelings, but doesn't!

He leaves their group just as they make their way into a classroom, aimlessly talking about the Homecoming and a Parent-Teacher day. It isn't a lab, but the lab won't be farther than the classroom... There. Just down the hall, he spots the glorious sight of lab tables. Thankfully, when Peter finds this room it's completely empty of students and teachers alike. He goes ahead and locks the door, shutting the blinds before making his way towards the teacher's area.

This reminds him of the good-old-days (bad days) where he would sneak into Midtown and steal the chemicals from the teacher's room. Everything is available for the taking: *salicylic acid, toulene, methanol, carbon tetra-chloride, potassium carbonate, ethyl acetate...*

"Oh, how I missed you!" Peter mumbles to the shelf, picking out what he needs.

His own custom webbing had taken him *months* to figure out, and now it only takes a few minutes to make. First, he considered using silk, but it wasn't sticky nor malleable enough for what he wanted to do. Synthetic silk had ended up the same, with it only around .875 gigapascals. In his latest version of the web formula, he had gotten it as close to real human-spider webbing as scientifically possible by using the resources Tony gave him, and he had been able to increase the webbing's distance along the way.

Tony's lab isn't here, so Peter won't be getting *that* webbing, but his second best version instead. He'll just have to fall back on what he knows for now. Peter has 14 CO2 cartridges to hold the webbing fluid, and that can last him a while. Hopefully, he doesn't need more than two week's worth. (Actually, he's hoping he's home as soon as Spider-Man can get into action.)

He smacks the goggles into place and reaches for a pair of gloves, rubbing his hands eagerly. The bubbling of the formula always pleases him when he stirs. Sort of like he's making a potion, like a witch.

"Double, double, toil and trouble..." Peter sing songs to himself as the web fluid grows sticky in the beaker.

Creepy when you do that, Bambino. He can hear Tony as if the man is sitting across from him. Peter smiles to himself. *Need to get you a witch costume for Halloween.*

The web fluid settles in the beaker as Peter shakes his head. He can't get distracted thinking about something other than getting out of here.

With that out of the way, Peter cleans up his mess as though he were never here. He stores the cartridges in his bag for now, his other jacket keeping them from clinking around in there. When he's satisfied that his presence has been erased- and that classes are in full swing, so no one should be in the halls- Peter unlocks the lab door and makes his way out.

Peter had always been used to empty hallways. He stopped going to school when he was 12, after all, and got all of his education from the library. (He wasn't about to let being homeless

stop him from learning everything he could.) But he still saw schools all the time, when he was breaking and entering to steal from them.

Now that he actually *goes* to school, and he isn't just sneaking in at night, he thinks an empty hallway might *actually* be a weird sight. But it's similarity to *something* he knows makes him feel at ease.

Then again, it also eats at him that something is missing.

No, not something. *Someone*.

Ned, Peter's *best* friend. He can say that confidently, without a worry in the world. He had met Ned the summer before he finally entered high school, the both of them finding the same corner to hide in during the orientation meet and greet. Ned had been easy to talk to, what with both of their tendencies to ramble and love to listen.

It wasn't hard for them to get to know each other. Peter draws in comfort when he is beside Ned, the boy's presence alone able to wash away the anxiety that came with re-entering school. He didn't need a lot of friends, not when he has Ned.

Even when he figured out that Peter is Spider-Man, he stuck by Peter's side and swore secrecy before Peter even suggested it. He wasn't excited because he had *a* friend that was Spider-Man, a hero who could do all of these cool things. He was excited because it was *Peter*. And that had brought a comfort to him that Ned will never really know.

That's why he can't decide on if the school hallways being empty are a relief or a burden on him. He's fallen back to seeking out what is familiar: isolation, shielding himself from the other people in the world. Never letting anyone get too close, because if they did, they'd see how Not Fine he is.

Peter thought it was a good thing, but he's not so sure anymore.

He doesn't wonder about the psychology of that, or that he likes to talk to himself. Instead, he focuses on the view of the school itself, since he has the time now. It's crazy what one can miss when they're in a rush to steal chemicals.

The school is fancy, but not in the way that Midtown is fancy. Midtown is all modern architecture, hallways with big glass window-walls and courtyards with walking paths that make no sense. The lighting was always too harsh on Peter's eyes; he has *beef* with fluorescent lighting. However, the architecture for Gotham Prep is like the rest of Gotham, a Gothic style that is sullied with posters of cartoons and motivational cats.

Classrooms have doors that were clearly just replaced, because they're shinier than the walls and smell like newly polished wood. The lighting isn't fluorescent, and Peter thinks that's the best thing about this place. The lights come from tiny chandeliers on the ceiling, the kind that look like electrical candles.

The lockers remain the same. They're darker than Midtown's, but they're decently clean and people like to decorate the outsides. One locker that he passes has a mirror on it (he so needs

a haircut soon), and another has a poster of some kind of pop-star of this universe- no, wait, that's a superhero. He has a big red S on his shirt, but he doesn't look exactly like Superman- he's got a more punk look about him. Is there more than one Superman?

He stops at a grand-looking trophy case that sits next to the staircase. It's filled with trophies on every shelf, and he wonders what's taking them so long getting another trophy case to put next to it it is sorely needed. He starts looking at one end, where the older trophies are, before taking a sneak peek at the names on the newer trophies.

The most recent name on the shiny trophy in front of him makes Peter pause.

'Eugene Thompson- Academic Decathlon.'

No fucking way.

Peter scoffs, blinking as if to clear the name and see another. Flash? *The* Flash Thompson? The annoying guy from his classes, the one always on about some rivalry with Peter? *That* Flash Thompson, here, in an alternate universe?

He has *got* to see this.

His mind is racing with thoughts, possibilities that he hadn't considered until now. He wonders if he could break into the school's system and see what classes he might be in, and try to catch a glimpse of what he looks like here. He had *briefly* wondered with Benny and Biggie being so alike if there were counterparts of people in each of their worlds, but he hadn't looked into it yet. Even if there are counterparts, he can't *say* that these would be friendly faces here.

Wouldn't it be insane? To think that there could be versions of his friends and family, right here in Gotham, and he just hasn't met them yet? A part of him is curious, but the other part thinks he should wait and see what this Eugene is like before he gets too excited.

What would an alternate version of Tony be like? Or Pepper? Or Happy?

Peter can't stop himself from giggling. Maybe Happy would be called Sadly and Pepper called Salt. Tony must not be Iron Man in this dimension, or else he would have heard of the superhero by now, even in Gotham. Oh, what if Tony is nearby? He might not be exactly like his Tony, but it would be cool to see. And if he's funny in this universe, he would so be able to tease Tony with this information.

That settles it. Peter *has* to know. It's just too good of an opportunity for Peter to pass up, and what else is he gonna do with his time before he goes out as Spider-Man?

He taps the display case as a little goodbye/thanks for the help, and then hurries down the steps towards the second floor, passing by two students on their way up. Their conversation is hushed, and neither look happy, but it comes to an abrupt stop when Peter passes by them.

?

"Hey, wait!"

Peter pauses when he hits the landing, looking back up at the older students. They had stopped midway on the steps, one of them holding chem books in his arms that threaten to spill over. He's definitely interested in the topic, because they're all filled with notebook papers, sticky notes that stick out the sides, and look busted to hell in the only way that an avid reader would get a book to look like.

But why are they stopping Peter? Aren't they late for class?

"Uh, yeah?"

"W-Where's your hall pass?"

The boy on the right scowls at the boy who asked. They both look like seniors or close to it, he thinks. The boy who asked has dark skin and a nice coat on, better than anything Peter could afford. The other is paler than what looks healthy, his black hair messy and windswept, like he'd been running late that morning. He had time to stop for coffee though; he's holding two cups in one hand.

"Where's yours?" Peter fires back.

"It's right here." The coffee guy digs into his pocket (with much difficulty) and pulls out a slip of paper. Peter raises a brow.

"That's a coupon."

Coffee looks at his hand, shocked at what he's holding. He must not have expected Peter to notice. Which, he might not have, if he didn't have enhanced vision. It's sort of hard to tell sometimes, considering Peter used to wear glasses, and now he's got super human eyesight. What's the regular person eye distance? Who fucking knows.

"That's- it-"

"You're late for class." Peter decides to just walk away. He takes the steps two at a time, leaving them to... *whatever* is going on there. He hears one smack the other on the arm and hiss under his breath, "*Hall pass? Really? Ugh, just, I'll call...*"

He gets the distinct sense that he recognized Coffee guy, but he doesn't know from where.

Peter shakes it off- he needs to get to the library! He'd stick to the school and go through their files directly, but he doesn't think sneaking around during office hours would be a good idea. Instead, Peter walks out of a side door when he gets off the staircase, and into the cold street.

Right now, he's in Old Gotham district, which is sort of far away from the University District, but... he should take that chance, right? Sure, he ran out on that Barbara lady last time he was there, but he has a feeling it's going to be empty when he gets there. That would be ideal for him. The less people the better.

And if it's not, he'll just run away again.

Little Legs tickles Peter's hand in anticipation inside his pocket, as if knowing where Peter was about to go.

-

BATCHAT

Timmy [7:42AM]: uyukid at ourt schol get hrer

Jay [7:45AM]: what?

Duuuuke [7:50AM]: we ran into Peter at the school. 95% sure he doesn't go here so don't know what's up with that

Dicko [7:52]: rlly!? omw now where did he go

Duuuuke [7:55AM]: he left went downstairs rlly fast dont know where after srry gtg teacher see me phone

Dicko [7:56AM]: RIP duke and timmy

Damian [7:57AM]: I assume Drake died, but Thomas just had his phone confiscated.

Dicko [7:58AM]: thnx dami

Damian [7:59AM]: You are welcome.

-

Babs [8:22AM]: @Dicko PETER IS HERE I'M GONNA STALL

Dicko [8:24AM]: THIS KID IS EVRYWHRE (; 'д `)

-

Peter peeks inside the library entrance for a sign that someone could be near. It's just as dark as it was before, and he can hear Barbara chilling in her office. She's on the phone with someone, but her voice is just a little too hushed for Peter to make out distinct words.

Thinking he should make this quick, Peter jogs towards the computers. Little Legs jumps out of his palm as he sits down and wiggles the computer awake. *In and out in five minutes, tops.*

Eugene Thompson. Peter repeats, sometimes forgetting his name isn't actually 'Flash.' He types in Gotham Prep's website and starts skimming through the club sections until he finds *Academic Decathlon.*

If only Peter could tell Ned about this. He can already hear his best friend babbling away the possibilities of what he could be like here. He'd be right next to Peter, sitting halfway in the chair with him, or maybe just on Peter's lap like Peter insists sometimes ("*-because seriously, Ned, you're light as a feather for me*"), and he'd have all sorts of theories that Peter

would laugh along to. “*Maybe he has a mohawk, or maybe he got a bad tattoo! Even better, what if he dyed his hair an ugly color?*”

Holding back a snicker, he scrolls down to see the names and pictures from the most recent addition to their site. It looks like the first one is from the debate that they just won. He scans the faces in the group picture for the familiar face, only to find himself... disappointed.

Flash isn't there. But... His *name* is? Why is that? Is this a case of Same Name? Because boooo, boring.

Peter scans again, looking back and forth to figure out who's who. That's when his eyes land on someone who... sort of? Looks like Flash? He's standing at the front holding his own trophy, the same one from the display case. He looks like Flash, but not really. The eyes are different, and the nose has a stronger outline, and- wait.

Why does this guy look like Mr. Thompson?

Flash's *father*?

“Whoa,” Peter breathes out. He leans back in his seat, staring at the picture.

He'd only met Mr. Thompson a handful of times, because the man doesn't often go to their school events. Which is partly why Peter cuts Flash some slack on his annoying nature. The worst Flash ever does is get too feisty with his made-up rivalry, and the rest of the time he looks like a grumpy cat. Peter can't find it in him to be angry with someone who looks like a grumpy cat.

But he does *know* what Mr. Thompson looks like. He's just a regular guy but he makes a distinct impression wherever he goes. He always looks like he's looking down at someone through his nose. Namely, Peter, because when Tony started fostering him, the news had been split on if Peter was a dangerous foster brat or a potentially “sweet, caring boy” who gets taken care of by a brilliant billionaire superhero. Mr. Thompson always had that look about him like he despised Peter and his origins, but was regrettably impressed that Peter had gotten Tony Stark's attention.

So... counterparts. Only, this one is a senior in high school, and is his classmate's *dad*.

Huh.

But the timeline...? Peter is growing confused. The newspaper had said that it was the same year as when Peter left his universe, so wouldn't it still be the same? Why would he be in a universe where everyone is younger than they're supposed to be? Unless...?

...*Unless what, Parker?*

“I don't know,” Peter growls at himself. This must just be a quirk of the universes that won't be explained.

“You don't know what?”

Peter jumps right out of his skin.

Barbara tilts her head at him. She had oh-so-quietly wheeled her way next to Peter- wheeled? Oh. Peter hadn't seen it last time, but Barbara hadn't been sitting in a chair, but a wheelchair behind that receptionist desk.

It's creepy how silent she had been, and how Peter never noticed her presence. Had he been that startled by figuring out that it wasn't Flash, or that time travel could be involved, or whatever is going on?

She smiles at Peter sweetly despite the last time she saw him, he had ran out of the door like his butt was on fire. In her lap is a stack of books that she's trying to balance. Peter almost holds his breath, trying not to sweat in front of her. Maybe she doesn't recognize him?

"Can I help you figure something out, Pete?"

Ah, blows!

"I, uh, was just confused about the time for the next academic decathlon meet." Peter lies, scratching his cheek. His computer screen is very visible right now, so that's the only lie that comes to mind. "My friend must have told me a thousand times already so I didn't wanna ask again."

Barbara doesn't out him on if it's a lie. She instead asks, "...They don't have it listed?"

"Apparently not." Peter quickly exits out of the tab and logs out of the session. He can tell Barbara's eyes are glued to the screen, and it worries him that she *knows* what he did in order to get in the computer. She *has* to know by now.

He stands up, trying to get in front of Little Legs so Barbara can't see. "Can I help you with those?"

He points at the books on her lap, fretting and dying every millisecond that passes by. Barbara was squinting at him, but when she processes his question, her face softens and she goes, "Oh! Yeah, thanks."

She hands Peter the stack of books and he walks with her over to the reception desk, next to the check out. He sets the stack down next to the scanner, and she thanks him again. Peter is about to run off like before (because hey, it worked last time!), but her hand snatches up a plastic jar and shoves it towards his face.

"Candy?"

NO NO NO DON'T

Peter looks at the jar and his face pales, a weak smile on his lips. The little red and white candies feel like they're laughing at him. "Uhm, no thank you, I'm allergic to peppermint."

Barbara takes them back in surprise, and attempts to set them behind her without looking. The jar clatters to the desk and spills a couple on the floor. Peter winces at the noise it makes,

as does Barbara. “That’s... unfortunate. I’ve never heard of a peppermint allergy before.”

“I get that a lot.” Peter laughs awkwardly, taking a few more steps back from the desk.

He needs to get out of here. Like, right now. The longer that he’s here, the more he feels like he’s going to get found out. Barbara, for some reason he can’t explain, has this quality about her eyes that makes him feel itchy. It’s like she’s constantly trying to figure him out, like she *knows* something that Peter doesn’t.

It isn’t a look that he likes to see pointed at him.

“I’ll get something different for next time you stop by.” She says, and Peter can barely hold his smile.

“You don’t- uh, have to do that.” Peter’s voice grows weak at her insistent grin. She waves him off.

“Nonsense! Hey, I notice you don’t have any books this time either.” She points out, leaning her arms on the desk. Peter nods, but he doesn’t know why. “Maybe I can help you find some? What do you like? Fantasy? Horror?”

“Uh, n-no,” Peter thinks she’s a little more insistent than last time he was here.

“Sci-fi?” She guesses with a tilt of her head.

Peter is starting to feel bad. He’s the only person that ever seems to come to this library, and Barbara *really* wants him to check out a book. He wants to try and find an excuse, anything to get him out of checking out a book, because he would need a library card to do that and he doesn’t *have* one.

But the librarian is giving him such an eager smile, waiting for his reply.

“Yeah,” Peter breaks. “I like sci-fi.”

“Awesome! I do too, it’s a lot of fun, yeah?” She prompts. Peter doesn’t have time to reply, as she presses on, “How old are you? I can’t let you check out anything over 12.”

“I’m 14!” Peter gawks at her, forgetting what’s going on for just a second. She shakes her head in surprise and looks him up and down.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah!” He insists.

“You need to drink more milk and eat your greens, kid.” She advises, and Peter sighs, dragging a hand in his hair. *When* is he gonna get a growth spurt? He’s so tired of looking like a baby! “Well that’s good, though! If you’re 14, you can check out of the Young Adult section!”

Peter watches her wheel around the desk, making her way over to the right. Peter's eyes widen as he spots Little Legs at his shoe, and he swoops down to pick it up. He thought the spider was in his coat this whole time!

"Peter?"

He grins nervously as he gets up from the ground. She's looking at his hands, and Peter thinks he might get sick. "I-I dropped a button."

A button? Seriously, Parker?

"...Right. So how do you feel about space sci-fi? You a Star-Wars fan?"

"You have-" Peter stops his mouth before it can betray him. "-something like Star Wars?"

He almost said "*You have Star-Wars here?*" Which could have been normal or weird to say. He doesn't want to take the risk.

"Yeah, of course! Come see."

??

His spider-sense is no help at all in this situation. It's just as confused as he is. Is she just a really eager librarian, or is this a trap? It feels like the second situation, but what if he's wrong? He has no evidence for the second, but he's been wrong before.

No danger... just confusion. Confusion is always better, even if it still sucks.

She can't be *that* bad, right? She's just trying to help him get a book.

Ah, but what if Peter gets back to his world before he can return the book? Then he would really look like an ass.

But she really wants to help him! And she's been nothing but nice to him!

He's being impolite.

He should just take up her offer. Maybe she won't even be mad that he hacked to computer to log in.

Maybe she already knows. If she does, she doesn't seem mad about it.

But some people are better at hiding it-

No, Peter is overthinking it again. Barbara is really nice. She doesn't want to hurt him.

Stop being a coward.

Peter takes all of one step before someone else enters the library. Barbara visibly relaxes when she sees him, and Peter tenses because of it. Was he wrong after all? Why would she look like that? Was she trying to keep him here?

Oh.

His first instinct is to think: *CPS*.

But the man who entered doesn't *look* like CPS. He's met enough social workers to get a sense of what they're like, even if all social workers are slightly different. This man is really tall, his black hair curling at the ends and pushed out of his face. He's in his late twenties or so, but he doesn't look like an old guy. He has very strong, distinct features that strike Peter as familiar, but he can't place how so. He sort of looks like someone that would get turned into a statue. A statue that would be called 'On the Run' or something, because he has a sweaty sheen on his tan skin as if he had ran to get here. His jacket is loose on one shoulder as though put on in a rush, half zipped up.

He looks at Barbara first, and then turns his head to look at Peter. He feels like a deer in headlights, unable to tell what his spider-senses are feeling, nor what he himself is feeling. The man smiles at him, a little out of breath as he asks, "Sorry. Did I interrupt something?"

"Not at all." Barbara says for Peter. He lowers his eyes from the man and to her, trying to gauge her reaction.

She's too relieved to see the stranger. This feels like it might be a trap after all.

"I was just getting Peter here some sci-fi books. Peter, this is my friend Dick Grayson."

"Nice to meet you, Peter." Dick holds out his hand for Peter to shake.

Peter does shake his hand, though not after hesitating to grab it. He tries to give a firm shake, but he's wary of adult strangers in *normal* circumstances, let alone in an alternate universe.

Dick's voice is *really* familiar.

??? ??? ???

"...Nice to meet you, Mr. Grayson."

Peter takes a step back from him, and he isn't sure if they noticed. Dick glances down as if he noticed.

"Oh, just call me Dick. No need for formal stuff." He waves it off, and Peter nods smally. If he was in his right mind, he'd make a joke. But Peter feels itchy and like he should run. He feels like he *knows* this guy. Does he? But where would he have seen him before? Is he a counterpart or something? But Peter can't recognize his face. "Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

Peter takes a second to think if anything to lie with.

"No."

Dick waits for anything other than that, and when Peter just gives him an awkward smile, his brow furrows before the confusion disappears again. Barbara, on the other hand, raises a

brow at Peter with no sign of covering up her train of thought.

“Uh, alright...?” Dick has no idea how to respond to that.

“My, uh, Dad checked me out. I’m actually supposed to be in the car waiting for him, so...” Peter edges towards the door.

“Wait, uh,” Dick looks like he’s thinking hard. Peter presses the handle to the door, wincing at the creaking sound it makes. “Weren’t you getting books?”

“Another time. Sorry, Miss Barbara.” Peter hurries out the door and down the steps.

weird.

Yeah, Peter agrees. That was weird.

-

“Oh my god, that was so awkward.” Dick puts his head in his hands, crumpling to crouch on the floor and feeling like a disaster idiot of a man- a fool, rather. Babs does nothing to disagree with him, which should be a comfort but it isn’t. In fact, she also puts her head in her hands, leaning over her lap as if the crushing blow had been dealt to her. Dick disagrees with that- at least Peter talked to her willingly.

“I offered him peppermint.” She sounds exhausted. “Guess who is *allergic* to peppermint.”

He’s what? “He’s *what?*”

“Yeah!”

The two of them let out twin groans of self hatred, unable to contain the embarrassment. Their plan is already feeling like a failure, and that’s not boding well.

They had made a decision right before Tim left for school: if Peter showed up, they’d try to track him down as civilians, because they wondered if the authority of them being vigilantes was scaring him into being defensive.

(Tim was the one to bring it up, mid revenge attack when he had Dick in a choke hold. Of course *he’d* be the first to suggest this, and Dick was under no illusion that Tim was asking *permission*, and was moreso just letting Dick know what was going on. But he at least tried to make it sound less like he was going to stalk Peter, and more like he was going to make a friend.)

The thing was, none of them were prepared for Peter to show up in the places that he did when they got word that he was out in the city. It was different from his usual routes: Benny’s, basketball courts, small hangouts. Public spaces where he can be seen talking to people in the neighborhood. (Though, Peter will sometimes just disappear from the sight of cameras during the day, sneaking off who-knows-where.) he had a schedule of sorts, even if it was hazy at best.

Dick did not expect the kid to be at Gotham Academy, of all places. The school that he is *definitely* not enrolled in?? And then Babs had seen him approaching on security cameras nearby and called Dick- just as he was almost to the school- he felt like he was lagging behind.

(And technically, he was. He had practically leapt out of bed when Jason called him to check the chat ((just so he could pass out himself, the traitor)), so he's running on around 30 minutes of sleep.)

Because Peter *definitely* made no sign that he'd be willing to come back *here*, either. Those who were awake to read the group chat figured they would have to make excuses to show up at the places Peter usually hangs out, but then Peter just wanders into *their* daily schedules. And to top it all off, Dick wasn't expecting anything to happen so *soon*.

It should be easier than this. At least for them. This is literally all that they *do*.

But now he's confused. It's like every time he thinks he has a read on Peter, the kid proves him wrong by swinging the other way. They all expected he'd want to open up to someone with less authority as a vigilante, a friendly face that can help him out more readily. But when Peter sees them as vigilantes, he at *least* has a conversation with them. When he sees them as civilians, and he runs away like they're shooting at him and throwing Molotov cocktails in his direction.

It reminds Dick too much of what Jason was like when he first came into their lives. The kid instinctively doesn't trust any adult he comes across, sets up barriers miles high. It's an issue of survival- keeping a fortress that no one can cross, protecting themselves before they can get hurt again.

Though Jason was more the fight to win type, and Peter is the type to fall back and plan a route of escape. All of it unsettles Dick *immensely*. Makes him feel hollow, like someone is carving out his chest and laying it all bare. Reminds him too much of his own family.

But Jason wasn't... he *wasn't* an angry kid. Nowadays, it's just Bruce, Alfred, and Dick that remember who Jason was before the Lazarus pit made him so angry, so riddled with hurt. Jason had been a *happy* kid, a bright light. he was more deserving of the title of a hero than anyone else could get. He made Robin like magic, not Dick, even though Dick had been Robin first. He deserved the colors, he was a good kid- though Dick will argue to his dying breath that Jason is still a good person, despite the hell they've gone through. Dick had been so glad that he was getting to know Jason, the kid that was behind the walls that were built to survive.

Behind the maze of Peter's story, Dick wonders if Peter is a happy kid too.

"We freaked him out." Babs is convinced. "He's never gonna come back here."

"Maybe he will." Dick tries, but he doesn't believe it. Not with how flighty the kid is. "...I just don't understand what could make him *run* like that."

“Dick...” Babs winces, looking up from her hands. Dick does the same, noticing her frown growing. “He’s a foster kid. He also sort of looks like a runaway. How many times do you want to bet someone called CPS on him?”

The very idea makes him wish he could time travel and prevent it from ever happening.

He’s not a stranger to foster-care. Dick had spent months in the system in the time that it took Bruce to become registered as a foster parent, and it was... Not good. Not *horrible*, because back then, the foster system wasn’t so... Well, everyone knows that there are ties to human trafficking in Gotham’s foster system. Back then, it wasn’t as prominent, but now? But he was never on the streets, he only has an outside perspective on that, even if he *knows* a lot about it. Jason spoke about it once, what it was like living on the streets and fending for himself.

If anything, it’d be weird that Peter *didn’t* have some type of issue with... all of that. Dick himself became... well, he didn’t know who to trust when he was in foster-care. The grief became his everything, and it wasn’t until Bruce took him in that he had some idea of what he wanted to do with that grief, the right way. He...

For all of Bruce’s faults, he had been someone to rely on. Jason knew that too, at some point. That they would have been lost to the world, or dead way sooner, had it not been for Bruce.

The kid *needs* someone to rely on. Because who the hell *is* he relying on? Certainly not Tony!

Tony, who they can’t find. Tony who isn’t here! He hates that this Tony guy has left Peter alone in *Gotham* of all places. Not that leaving Peter would be acceptable anywhere else either. But *Gotham*??? Setting him loose like that is inexcusable, no matter what the case. He doesn’t know what Tony did that had Peter get so attached to him, so defensive of him even though he isn’t *there*.

He had heard from Babs the conversation that Peter had with Red Hood. And then Jason himself had spoken about it with Dick, on the phone that same night. Peter had almost gotten hurt, or *died*, and his first instinct was to protect Tony. Tony, before Peter. Instead of letting it sink in that *he* could have gotten hurt, that he was alone, he protected someone that isn’t even here. Peter was in *some* sort of spiral. Jason said it was like the kid had seen a ghost, that his gaze was far off and felt disconnected until he jumped to Tony’s defense. He flinched at the slightest of sounds and attempted to get small so he wouldn’t be seen. They all know what it was, because they get it too.

And *then*. As if that wasn’t bad enough, Dick gets a call on his way to Gotham this morning, from Bruce. About how Peter had decided to get back out into Gotham after those few days where Dick was assured he was safe inside. He had gotten involved in some kind of fight, and almost got hurt *again*. But this time, he was barely fazed by what happened. Bruce said he was calm, he talked the victim out of a panic attack, made her laugh and assured her she’d be okay. And his conversation with Batman?

Where was Tony that time, too? According to Peter- *gone!* Again!

What is going on inside that kid's head, and how can they help him? Dick figured they at least had some sort of experience with this that would help. Peter makes *that* assumption look stupid as hell.

"Did you know he's 14?" Babs asks, and Dick stares at the ground as he processes the question. The ground he wish would open up and let him lay in a grave and be dramatic until he's in his 50's. Because if he's dramatic in his 50's it'll look too much like a mid-life crisis and Dick wants to avoid that at all costs.

"14?" That's...

"I *know*." Babs presses, looking towards the ceiling for a semblance of peace. "14. God, he looks like a baby. He *is* a baby, in my eyes. Now that I'm an adult I feel like I made myself grow up too fast and I look at teenagers and go, 'that's a little kid.' And..."

Dick feels bad, but he accidentally tunes Babs out as she rambles. His mind is caught on baby face Peter. Peter doesn't look 14. He looks like he's 12, maybe, and just started growing out of his baby face. Maybe that's right, and Peter wasn't trying to make himself *sound* older, but if it is-

"He's got to be malnourished." Dick is starting to think that maybe the best way to get close to Peter is by working a food job. He'd spend Bruce's money for it no problem. "Do you think I can Doordash?"

"Don't even think about it." Babs points at him sternly. "You'll freak him out more."

"But he isn't eating properly!" Dick protests from the ground. Babs wheels towards the reception desk, looking at the tiny peppermint candies that fell to the floor. She picks up the ones that scattered on the desk, scowling at them. "He's too skinny... He's way too short to be 14, are you sure?"

"He was pretty upset that I assumed he was 12. Had the feeling of someone who gets that a lot and wants to be taken seriously like a grownup."

Like a grownup... Dick runs his hands through his hair, the tie that was barely holding on for dear life falling out. Peter had to grow up way too fast, and Dick understands that so deeply. He *really* gets that. That's probably why it upsets him so much to think about it, because it reminds him a little too much of himself, for some reason.

(Why can't he get this Peter kid out of his head? Why is it that this just keeps coming back? Is it just that detective, gut instinct? Is it some intuition he doesn't understand yet? *What is it? Why does this feel bigger than it is?*)

What kind of hell has this kid been through? It's years in the making, but also so fresh that it still bleeds. Peter is walking along the edge of some dark cavern, as if ready to leap in should the moment call for it. So who is responsible for that?

Is it Tony? Or is it someone else, someone they don't know about yet? Who could possibly let Peter get to the point he's at now? Who was taking care of him? Who...

"Tony 'knew he couldn't do this again.' That's what he said."

Who left this kid in the first place?

"You okay?"

Babs' voice is quiet, not wanting to break the peace if Dick was trying to get to that point. But he's glad she asked, because there's no peace coming for him. His mind is spiraling in an attempt to get answers, to reason.

"He's so *small*, Babs." Dick looks up at her, seeing the hurt reflected in her eyes. "I know what it's like to... I mean, my parents... And then seeing the person who got me out of a tough situation, who pretty much saved my life, as someone to look up to and see them from a pedestal..."

"I know." Babs wheels closer to Dick, stopping just in front of him and reaching her hands out to his hair. She fixes it with gentle fingers, pushing it out of his eyes. "I hope he comes back."

Dick hums in agreement. But in his head, he's already made up his mind to find Peter even if he doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

AHH!! So here we are! Again, thank you SOOO much for all of the love and comments!! i actually had to split this chapter into two because it got wayyyy too long, so chapter 3 has a few scenes that were from chapter 2. Now, on to some questions I've been getting:

Update schedule- there is no set update schedule. Don't panic! I like to stockpile my chapters, so I'm currently writing chapter 7. So far, the fic is set at 115,000 words, but it'll get bigger. There's no update schedule because I don't want to set a day and disappoint anyone if I can't make it because of Life Reasons (I have gotten hit with the ao3 curse a few times). When I finish writing chapter 7, I'll post chapter 3, and so on. I will do my very best not to leave you hanging.

"Why are you insane" is another question I've gotten. You can blame alightwood <3 they got me into Batfam in the first place, and now they feed my delusions. On the other hand, i DO have a 700-800k VLD fic that is still ongoing, so I've always kinda sorta just been like this, hope that helps <33 :3

if you have any other questions, please ask them here and I'll do my best to reply (without spoiling!)

there ain't no room for selfish, we do it for the people

Chapter Summary

“He’s good, whoever he is. And his doodles get better throughout the night.” Babs has the nerve to sound impressed. “He draws dogs with two circles, four stick legs and a stick tail, and a smiley face.”

“I don’t care how he draws his dogs!”

“You should.” She snickers in his ear.

Chapter Notes

Updating a week early but that's because I'm going to be losing some time while on a family trip and I realized I won't be able to post it then. Might as well put it out now so I don't forget.

Once again, thank you guys for all the love! Y'all have no idea how much we talk about your comments, memes, and tiktoks about it, it's so much fun. And your theories! We looooooove the theories, it's one of my favorite parts.

word count for this chapter: 19,410. Should take an average 1 hour and 18 minutes to read, for anyone who likes to plan ahead to read the chapters during travel, etc.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Ned first met Peter, he really didn’t know what he was getting into. That being said, Ned would make the same choice if he had to go back in time.

Sometimes he reads manga or web comics where the whole premise is that the main character wakes up back at the start of their life. And their lives were like, shitty, so obviously *they* always change what they can and make different decisions (sometimes worse decisions). But Ned doesn’t roll like that.

His life has been pretty okay so far (he’s trying not to jinx it) and he thinks that if that happened to him, he wouldn’t change anything if he could help it. Though he does think about the moral dilemma of knowing that something bad is going to happen and having to let it happen because he knows what comes from it and he doesn’t want to play god, or intervening because he knows it’ll cause pain and he wouldn’t be able to bear the thought.

(But also, he'd be like, a little kid?

Like, how are these characters even able to do any of what they do? They're like, 7 years old. Doesn't matter if they have the mind of an adult or whatever, they are *not* picking up those swords. Whatever, that's not the point and he's rambling.)

Weird and unnecessary side tangents aside, what Ned is trying to say is that he's so glad Peter is his best friend. If there's a universe out there where that isn't true, then he imagines that universe is a much darker, much less happy place.

Ned stares at the dark tile beneath his feet, settled onto the couch in Stark Tower that he's claimed every day since Peter went missing. FRIDAY will help him with his homework if he asks, but today, Ned feels like staring at the paper and just pretending that he tried.

He knows he's probably annoying.

No, scratch that. He knows he's *definitely* annoying.

If it was him who had to deal with his son's best friend showing up every day after school to sit on his couch and ask a billion questions to everyone that passes by, he thinks he'd be pretty annoyed. If the Avengers (the fucking *Avengers*) are secretly wishing he would uninvite himself from their presence, they're doing a pretty good job of hiding that fact.

Ned just can't *help* it. Ever since he first got that alert from Peter's phone that something was wrong, he couldn't get that nauseous and ugly anxiety to uncoil itself from around him. It felt suffocating, not knowing if Peter is okay or not. He doesn't know what else to do with himself, if not sit on this couch and *be* there when something happens.

Like, what *would* he do? Go *home*?

They want him to sit on his bed instead, or at his desk, and try to do homework like a good kid whose best friend isn't missing? But instead, he'd just keep looking at his phone, awaiting a call or a text from either Mr. Stark, Ms. Potts, or Peter himself? They want him to twiddle his stupid little thumbs and go to school like the world isn't ending?

He can do his homework here, at the coffee table in the lounge, looking at the pictures of Peter on the wall. They had been added to the collection of photos the Avengers hung up since they first became a solid team. Right next to a picture of Peter, Mr. Stark, and Ms. Potts at Peter's first day moving in, is a picture of Peter and Ned. Peter had texted him as soon as he put up, with an insane amount of smiley face emojis.

Ned leaves school or academic decathlon and he uses the badge Mrs. Potts gave him to go up the elevator, say hello to FRIDAY, and sit down right here. This is his post, his harbor, and he can't help but akin himself to a lighthouse keeper. And he wouldn't have it any other way, not until Peter is back.

When Ned would come here with Peter, they'd usually head right up to the penthouse where Tony and Pepper live. It should have been nerve wracking the first time (it was, don't let Ned's inner monologue fool you), but Peter made it easy to get comfortable. Instead of

focusing on the fact that he was at Tony fucking Stark's house, and he passed Sam Wilson on their way up, all of Ned's attention was on Peter.

Peter's room is right next to the kitchen and has been filling itself with the Lego sets they make together, and the walls are slowly getting covered in band posters and Star Wars art. There's something about coming over every week and seeing the evidence that Peter has taken root somewhere, and he feels comfortable doing so, that Ned enjoys.

But Ned doesn't have a place there right now, since he's just a guest and Peter isn't here. That'd be weird to go sit in Peter's room without him there, even if it is the only place he *really* knows in the Tower. So he instead made his base right at the heart of where the Avengers sleep and eat, because they're bound to acknowledge his presence that way.

Not that they wouldn't either way. Steve (because he insisted not to call him Mr. Rogers), sends him texts when there's an update and Ned is at school or home. And while Mr. Stark is... going through it, he still gives Ned the time of day to make him eat and throw out a comment about Ned always being here.

He's seen first hand over the past 6 months that Peter is way stronger than he looks, and he's more resilient than anyone Ned knows. He might have been a fan of Spider-Man's since way back when the vigilante was just rumors online, but Ned can say confidently that he's Peter's number one fan now.

Not Spider-Man, but *Peter*.

He had found out about Spider-Man after 3 months of friendship, at Peter's 14th birthday party. Which sounds really fast, considering Peter had kept his identity so close to his heart and Ned doesn't think he's special enough for that. But they had met at a summer program for school, and clicked in a way that Ned had never really had before.

Like, a best friend? (He ignores the small feeling in his chest that disagrees with that word, that calls Peter something *more*.)

Ned has a lot of friends, but none that he could say he'd call up to complain about his Lola yelling at him for his grades, or when he wants to talk about missing his parents. Or when he has one of those days where he feels *othered* from people, even if they like him, and he knows that he could say it without explaining it and Peter would just *get it* in the way no one else does.

Peter's his first *best* friend, and Ned now knows that it's the same for Peter. At the time of the birthday party that neither of them will forget, Peter had told Ned more than he has ever told anyone, save for his therapist. And Ned, too, felt (and still feels) like he could tell Peter anything and it'd be locked away in this friendship vault forever.

Which is maybe why Peter was less troubled about Ned finding out why Tony Stark seemingly randomly decided to foster a kid one day than he was troubled about Ned learning that Peter thinks math is blue and science is red.

Though Ned will point out the best way to tell him may not have been walking on a wall and saying “*So... I’m Spider-Man.*” like he was just admitting that he had a tiny side hobby like collecting books or something.

So yeah. Ned knows about Spider-Man, he knows Peter’s strong. He knows that Peter has more backup than any other 14 year old in the universe. He knows that everything is going to be fine.

But still. His best friend was kidnapped in broad daylight and they have no idea where he is.

And it’s been 12 days.

And they only barely managed to hide this from the press, because somehow no one noticed the fight that happened in the sky.

And Peter can only be absent from school for so many days with a ‘cold’ before someone gets wind of this and comes to the Tower, asking why Mr. Stark *lost* Peter as if it was *his* fault. *And then everything could come tumbling down because they’d decide that Peter isn’t safe with Mr. Stark, and Peter would get thrown back to the wolves-* and Ned knows the plan would be them going on the run together. Mr. Stark would help them change their names and they’d go to a school in some remote country together, *and Ned’s Lola would only maybe question it if Mr. Stark didn’t charm her somehow. That could work right? Because Mr. Stark has enough money to make it go away and he wouldn’t lose his best friend forever-*

And Ned is maybe thinking of worst case scenarios, yeah, but he’s had a pretty bad day today and it’s only getting worse the more he thinks about how Peter *could* be dead and they don’t know, *because that stupid guy that snatched him-*

“At this point I need to put a placard on the couch dedicated to you like it’s a park bench.”

Mr. Stark heaves a sigh as he settles onto the couch next to Ned. His clothes are disheveled enough that Ned is convinced he either just woke up (it is 4:32PM) because he searched all night or he hasn’t gotten any sleep at all and was holed away in the lab. The dark eye bags are proof for both options, so Ned is stuck.

He folds his hands in his lap, unfolds them, then decides to stick with folding his hands anyway. Then he gives up and rubs a hand on his chin, turns to Ned, and says:

“You know, realistically, I could make a lightsaber if I wanted to.”

Ned stares at Mr. Stark.

“Why wouldn’t you want to?”

“Five seconds.”

Ned pauses, debating on whether to answer that or not. Every conversation he has with Mr. Stark is like figuring out a riddle or... no, it’s like waiting for a jack in the box to pop. But instead of a jump scare, he has some clever line or snarky remark waiting to be sprung on you.

“...Until Peter and I would destroy something?”

A ghost of a smile tells Ned he got it exactly right. “So you’re *aware* you would *destroy* my home if you had a lightsaber?”

“I wouldn’t feel bad about it either.” Ned admits. Mr. Stark barks out a laugh.

“I would have brought it upon myself. The same can be said about many, many, many things. Or not, because I’m sure I could throw out an NDA to anyone willing to point it out.” Mr. Stark leans back on the couch, kicking his feet up on the table.

“You tell Peter not to put his feet on the table.”

“Because of his god-awful shoes.” Mr. Stark gestures to his own feet. “These are Berluti Alessandro, and I just had them cleaned. Peter is walking on the walls and all around New York in those ratty Good Luck shoes, like the animal he is that won’t let me get him some better shoes. Also: I *own* the table, I say who can put their feet where.”

Ned manages a smile then, some of that nausea chipping away at him. He hates to ruin what is most likely Mr. Stark trying to distract him, because all the adults seem to think that’s the best course of action, but...

“Anything?”

Mr. Stark knew the question was coming, because he puts his hands behind his head and doesn’t really say anything for a moment. It feels like he had already been thinking on what to say before he even got here.

“It’s complicated.” Mr. Stark decides on, and before Ned can open his mouth to tell him that just because he’s 14 it doesn’t mean he can’t handle it when Mr. Stark raises a steady hand to silence him. “How much do you know so far?”

Ned squints.

“Don’t look at me like that, like I don’t know everything. I know some of us have been trying to keep you to bare minimum knowledge to not freak you out, but personally, I think that’s stupid ‘cause you’re already freaking out. I also know there’s no way you haven’t been somehow figuring out how to get more from one person individually.”

Ned does look away at that, because the guy’s spot on. While the people he does get to talk to are wary because he’s young and not a superhero like them, some of them can’t resist puppy eyes. Others, like Thor, are totally chill and have no idea Ned isn’t supposed to know some things.

“I don’t wanna brag or anything, but because I have a massive amount of perception, I’ve noticed you got this tiny habit of making connections that other people don’t. It’s why Peter likes you so much.” Mr. Stark adds when Ned doesn’t supply anything. “So, whaddya got?”

Ned chews his bottom lip unsurely. He’s kind of the opposite of Peter sometimes. Peter, as much as he looks up to adults, keeps things close to his chest, and he often pretends he

doesn't need their approval. No, not need. Peter doesn't need anyone's approval to continue forward. But he sure does *want* it. He just would rather die than tell them that. Even if it's obvious.

Ned? The opposite.

God, he needs approval or he'll actually rot and die.

If a teacher is mad at him? Especially one he likes? Shoot him. Put him out of his misery. Lord forbid if they're *disappointed*.

Mr. Stark might not be mad or disappointed, it actually sounds like he could not care less about what Ned does and doesn't know. But he is an adult in the form of the most adult it can get: billionaire, father, and superhero.

Like, come the fuck on. This jerk knew Ned didn't stand a chance. He knew Ned would fold the second he said he noticed something Ned did, and when he mentioned Peter. He's a manipulative asshole.

(He's really cool.)

"The guy who took Peter is enhanced," Ned begins, and Mr. Stark doesn't make an outward reaction other than his eyes narrowing just a bit. "We don't know where either of them are because they haven't shown up anywhere else. And they're targeting you."

Mr. Stark's jaw clenches and he sits up, putting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands. He doesn't look at Ned, and he doesn't blame Mr. Stark for feeling uncomfortable.

On one hand, Ned is pissed.

He hates that this happened on their watch. Because Peter was supposed to be one of the safest kids ever- who the *hell* would go after a kid surrounded by Avengers? But on the other hand.

A lot of people would go after a kid that the Avengers are fond of.

From what Ned has gathered, there was a point of contact exactly three days after Peter was taken. There was only text, and they haven't been able to find the source of where this message came from. They don't know if it's an organization or if it's just two people, or just the one guy who took Peter. All they know is what the person demanded:

Tony Stark. We have Peter Parker with us. If you ever wish to see him again, you will comply with our demands without hesitation. You will relinquish control of Stark Industries, handing over all shares, assets, and intellectual property associated with the company. This includes but is not limited to:

1. *Ownership of Stark Tower and all affiliated properties.*
2. *All patents, research, and technology developed by Stark Industries, including Iron Man suits and related technologies.*
3. *You will withdraw all positions of authority and influence within the business world.*

Failure to comply with these demands will result in Peter Parker's inability to return.

There was no proof of life. No picture, no hair, no- god, no finger, thankfully. Nothing to say that Peter is alive, nothing to say that he's being hurt or not. The not knowing is the worst part. The thing is, no one will let Mr. Stark do anything.

He was ready to give it all up. He was going to, instantly. But everyone had to talk him down, because there was no proof of life, and Mr. Stark's tech can do monstrous, evil things when in the wrong hands. It's happened before, and it's one of Mr. Stark's greatest shames. Peter would never forgive him if he gave it all up and people were hurt because of it.

"Mr. Stark, you know Peter wouldn't be mad at you, right?"

"I know." Mr. Stark agrees, his voice low. "Doesn't make it right."

There's a pause between the two of them before Mr. Stark speaks again.

"We located where that original message came from. It was at an old storage unit in Queens." Mr. Stark says slowly. "Just down the street from where Peter grew up with his Aunt and Uncle. I don't think it's a coincidence. I think they knew it would get under our skins. They're telling us that they know a lot about Peter and a lot about me."

"They knew you'd react like this." Ned agrees, because it's not like it's a secret that Mr. Stark values Peter's privacy or his well being. When Peter was first brought into the home, Mr. Stark became the paparazzi hunter, sniffing them out like a hunting dog and putting them down no problem. Peter's image barely gets to one news source before Tony's lawyers drag them out into the metaphorical river bank to drown them.

It's easy to conclude from how Mr. Stark treats Peter when a news source *is* able to get their hands on something that Mr. Stark cares about Peter a lot. And it's noticeable with the absence of the news just the same.

"Do you think they know you?" Ned asks.

"I think so." Mr. Stark looks older when he's tired. "But because I was able to track down their first message, if we get any others, I'll be able to work faster. I don't know why they didn't include a time limit, or..."

Mr. Stark sighs like he's got one foot in the grave.

"Look, I really came here to tell you that we're going to have to get CPS involved."

"No!" Ned stands up from the couch and almost wobbles when the action makes him dizzy. "You know that Peter-"

"We can't keep saying that he's sick and faking doctor's notes." Mr. Stark tells Ned what he already *knows*. "They're going to find out sooner or later. Let me and Pepper handle that side of things. I promise, I won't let anything happen to Peter- Again."

His voice sounds choked at the end and he barely managed to push through like he wasn't going to be sick.

"I know you're his dad and you're a superhero and- and-"

Ned actually has no idea what he's trying to say.

"You know Peter will just disappear if they try to take him." Ned finally manages to get out. "What if they do? What if they say it's your fault?"

"They might very well say that, but I'm not letting him go anywhere." Mr. Stark is convinced, and it settles that voice in Ned's head that was screaming that everything was going to go to shit. "And when CPS comes-"

"We'll tell them I'm here, and everything is fine!"

Ned feels himself choke, and Mr. Stark freezes on the couch. The voice washes over them and then hits them again. Ned stumbles on his feet to turn towards the door they hadn't heard open, eyes wide and breath stolen.

"They won't suspect a thing." Peter says, grinning at them both. Ned feels like he's been dunked in molasses. "It'll work itself out from there."

Peter strides into the room, and Ned tries to make a noise but his mind is blue screening and someone took his voice away from him. Peter looks whole- he looks *fine*. He's wearing clean clothes, his brown, curly hair is neat and there's not a scratch on his face. Tears prick at Ned's eyes when Peter walks closer, relief heavy in his voice as if he'd been looking for them. "Dad, Ned, you look like you saw a gho-"

He barely is able to regain his bearings so he can run at Peter when Mr. Stark jumps from the couch, grabs Ned's arm, and fiercely glares at somewhere behind Peter, near the door.

"*Loki*." Mr. Stark seethes, and Ned flinches at how the hiss of anger melts the moment like poison. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Mr. Stark?" Ned is now behind Mr. Stark, and Peter- his eyes are green- stops in front of them. He has an unnatural grin donning his face, as if he hadn't heard Mr. Stark's anger. There's a brief moment where Ned tries to get closer to Peter, but then his best friend disappears in a cloud of smoke.

Oh.

Wait, no, not 'oh.'

What?

Ned feels his heart sink to his stomach as it hopes crush under foot. Someone's laughter echoes from the doorway. Like he's walked out of the shadows itself, a tall man with pale skin and slicked black hair leans forward. He takes a step into the room, heels clacking on the

floor, and stopping a few feet away from the couches. There's a thin, unpleasant smile on his lips that makes Ned feel a little ill.

"Stark, I thought you would appreciate my little show." The man, Loki, Ned thinks, has his hands behind his back, as if caught with something he shouldn't have.

"I would appreciate if you *didn't* parade around my son's image like it's a joke to you." Mr. Stark is *mad*, and Ned feels like this is going downhill very, very fast. "Why are you here?"

Loki's eyes flick down at Ned, and it disturbs him to see how much it looks like Loki *knows* him. His eyes crinkle with amusement as he offers to Mr. Stark, "Why, to help you, of course. I heard you are in *desperate* need of an illusion."

-

"Peter, I swear to God, if I turn around and you're doing that freaky shit again, I ain't feeding ya till you're thirty."

Peter immediately puts down the five pans he was balancing on his nose. One of the most important lessons he's ever learned is "Don't mess with the guy that makes your food." And Benny is keeping Peter from starving, so the rule is doubled.

"I think it's less 'freaky' and more 'show stoppingly cool', but whatever." Peter hops onto a spinny tool next to the sink, setting down the last pan.

"I think you shouldn't get to think." Benny replies flatly, but Peter can see he's secretly amused. Because for some reason, old men *never* wanna admit that Peter is hilarious and fun and awesome.

The old man had insisted that Peter doesn't have to help out in the kitchen during closing, but Peter feels like it's the least he could do for how generous Benny is being. He feeds Peter and doesn't question the ungodly amount of food that he eats, he ignores the random appliances that Peter comes back with, and he doesn't call CPS on him. Also, they have nice conversation. So Peter has been making sure to come back during closing time to make the process go much faster.

He just has to avoid touching anything citrus and any of the vinegar that Benny has for some of his other menu items. It's fairly easy to do, considering Peter's spider-senses freak the fuck out when he gets anywhere close to them. Same thing with peppermint, tea tree, lavender, cinnamon, and cankers.

"Wow, if you're gonna have that attitude, I'm gonna take my show on the road." Peter jokes, sitting criss cross on the spinny chair and watching Benny do the dishes. The dishes are the last thing to do that night, and Peter is only allowed to hand Benny the dirty dishes and not wash them.

"Where you gonna go?" Benny's lip turns up into a small smile. "Back to New York? Good."

"I was thinking the circus. They could always use an act like me."

“An act like you?” A raised brow makes Peter scoff.

“Oh, *please*, they’d be honored to have me. Not only because I’m incredibly good looking, but I’m extremely talented, and my personality is charming. I’m freaky enough that I’d be welcomed with open arms.”

“So you admit that you’re a little freak.”

“The balancing act is the least weird thing about me, Benny.” Peter admits, but much in the tone that promises trouble. “What if I told you that I don’t have bones?”

Benny pauses scrubbing one of the pans, glancing towards Peter with narrowed eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t have bones.”

“Everyone has bones, Peter.”

“*I* don’t.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“*Am* I?”

There’s a bout of silence, and Benny closes his eyes. He lets out long suffering sigh, and he must decide that this isn’t worth the trouble, because when he opens his eyes again he sets down the pan in the sink. It disappears under the bubbles while Benny turns to face Peter and opens his arms wide, and says, “Alright, hit me.”

“You’ve got my number down.” Peter nods his head, impressed. Not many people understand Peter so quickly. He thinks it’s old people talent. Or, maybe, it being Gotham, Benny is used to the weird.

“Get on with it.”

Peter grins wide, already anticipating Benny’s reaction. He’s *not* as prepared as he thinks he is.

Benny expects Peter to get up from the spinny chair, but Peter puts his leg behind his back in one fluid motion. Immediately, Benny’s face scrunches up in displeasure, making him look five years older. “Alright, but that’s not really-”

He knew that was coming. Peter sets one hand in the middle of the spinny chair and in the same pose, lifts himself easily to do a one armed hand stand on the chair. He wiggles his fingers and manages to turn the chair around so he can face Benny, and barks out a laugh. Even upside down, Peter can see Benny has retreated back about five steps and is appalled.

“‘Not really’ what?”

“Where are your bones?”

“I don’t have ‘em.”

“Bullshit.” Benny takes a rag off his shoulder and hits Peter’s side with it. Peter chuckles and gets down, sitting back cross legged on the spinny chair, throwing out his Picture Perfect Angel Smile™ at the old man. “That’s just gross and weird.” He says, but it’s got no heat behind it. “And be careful doin’ shit like that here.”

Peter’s head tilts to the side. What does that mean? He thought that Gotham was a place that embraced the weird, the wacky, and the unsure. He’s seen plenty evidence for that face: no one reacts to crime anymore, and a lot of people treat muggings with the same attitude as stepping in dogshit on accident. Annoying, but it won’t kill you. And with the way they talk about rouges here, one would think that the rouges were just flies that buzz around their heads.

“How come?”

Benny draws out the silence long enough that Peter thinks he just won’t be getting an answer. Something in Benny’s demeanor shifts from having fun to uncomfortable.

“Peter, how are meta’s treated in New York?”

He freezes.

It’s stupid, considering Peter was just showing off a little. But at the same time, that’s a human thing that can happen. Peter had just performed a contortionist move maybe a little too easily, but is that what tipped Benny off?

“I-I don’t know.”

Benny grunts, picking up the pan from the bubbles and resuming his scrubbing without making eye contact with Peter. “Alright, well lemme tell ya how they are treated in Gotham.”

“Does- Does this have to do with Batman’s rule?”

He keeps scrubbing, and Peter winces at the noise. “No metas in Gotham?”

“Uh huh.”

“I don’t know nothin’ bout Batman or why he has his rules. He’s stronga than me, because I woulda killed a lot of the rouges in this city a long time’o’go. But that’s why I’m not a vigilante, y’hear? I served my country and did what I could to help people, and now I’m old. That ain’t my business anymore.”

Benny is avoiding the topic. Peter doesn’t interrupt.

“Round here, metas are either top of the food chain, or their fodder. Treated as inferior. Forced into those meta fightin’ rings for people’s entertainment, or made into lackeys for people like the Penguin or Black Mask, the like.”

The who and the who?

Peter sits on that for a few seconds. He has about a million questions that just stacked up in his mind: *What are the meta fighting rings? How do you know about them? Does everyone know about these? Does Batman? How did you know I might be a meta?*

But to avoid bombarding Benny, and also because Peter knows he's gotta remain cool about this in case Benny doesn't know as much as Peter thinks he might, he just nods slowly, gulping nervously.

"They that common around here? I ain't ever heard of 'em before."

"Haven't, huh?" Benny seems to take this as confirmation of something. "Well, just lettin' you know. And non-meta homeless can be picked up too. So be careful."

Peter cracks a small smile. "You worried about me, Benny?"

"It's a real problem." The older man huffs in annoyance.

"...So..." Peter can sense that the conversation about the meta rings are going to go nowhere with Benny right now, so he tries to think of anything else to ask. Actually, he might have a good reason to be asking anyways- he wants to go out as Spider-Man tonight.

"Soooo?" Benny mocks.

"What *is* the deal with Batman and all these rogues?" Peter hands him another pan, and Benny gets to scrubbing. "Like, how come there's so many? I read on the wiki-"

"The wiki only holds at most *half* of Gotham and it's nonsense, kid." Benny warns. "You read about Arkham Asylum, right?"

"Yeah, that most of your rogues go in and out of that place like it's just a 30 minute timeout."

"It's *something* alright. A pain in the ass, more like it." The men grumbles, and then Peter finds himself the victim of a long winded complaint. "New Jersey don't got the death penalty. Now, we *could* make some fuckin' sense and put it back, 'cause seriously, how many lives is it gonna take before we do somethin' about it? How many kids lose their parents and how many parents lose their kids before someone makes a damn change? But nah, that ain't comin' anytime soon.

"Lord knows that we *tried*. But legislation takes years, it takes time, and it takes kickin' the government in the ass to get anything done. And the thing is, we ain't gonna be doin' any ass kickin' at the moment, 'cause they're keepin' us all poor and fucked up with chemicals and oil spills and bad infrastructure and corrupt cops. They got us where they want us, and they ain't gonna give it up easily."

Peter hums in reply, but Benny isn't doing much paying attention to Peter, so much as he's ranting about something it appears he's been angry about for a long while.

"There's too many people in power that benefit from the way things are for any change to get done any time soon." Benny grits his teeth, scrubbing a pan with vigor. "And 'cause we don't

have the death penalty, even if we managed to get the rogues into prison, they could just escape from there the same way they escape the Asylum.”

“Why *don't* they go to prison? Are they all actually insane?”

“Genuinely, kid, that’s a loaded fucking question.” Benny huffs irritably.

Peter sets his feet on the bars of his stool, watching the bubbles as they go down in the sink. “And Batman?”

Benny doesn’t say anything for a few moments. Peter turns his gaze back up towards the older man. Benny has mentioned quite a few times about his career in the military, where there’s a good chance he had taken someone’s life. Peter is conflicted on that, but not towards Benny. A lot of people go into the military wanting to believe in something, whether that be believing in the country they live in, or believing in change.

“I say it takes a strong man to look at what those folks did, and to still understand it ain’t your job to play judge, jury, or executioner.”

Peter swings his feet as he ponders this. He very well knows this rule. When Ben...

When Ben died, Peter wanted revenge. He wanted to take an eye for an eye, a life for a life. He wanted that man to own up to what he did, to be sorry for ruining Peter’s life, taking the one father figure that he’d ever known. He wanted him to grovel for the fact that it was him that had taken Ben’s future from him in mere seconds. The man had so much to *do*.

He had so much to *say*. To teach Peter. The man might have gotten away with money, but what he really robbed Peter of was his childhood, and he robbed Peter and Ben of the chance to grow together.

Ben will never get to see Peter grow up, like he had worked so hard for Peter to be able to do. When Peter graduates high school, gets his first significant other, when Peter- When Peter himself becomes a dad, maybe, someday... Ben was supposed to be there for it. Sometimes Ben would joke that Peter might not need him around by that point, but Peter couldn’t fathom that.

When would he ever stop needing Ben?

He’s been dead for four years now, and still, the wound aches and bleeds like it was yesterday. Peter still needs him now, but he won’t get him. Peter misses Ben like he missed May, like he wishes he missed his parents.

He’d been so angry, and yet he learned his lesson. The last thing that Ben taught him was that Peter had a responsibility, just like Ben had a responsibility.

“Batman is a detective or something, right?”

Peter only adds the ‘or something’ for the benefit of the doubt. But Peter has *seen* Batman in person before, had taken note of all of the body language that Batman had tried to conceal. he’s kept his ear out, and from this perspective that Peter has, he can see it all too well.

A lot of ‘vigilantes’ outside of the hero community, they take on the job of being some kind of omnipotent Death like being. They have their own moral codes and they run into the fray to chant what they think is right. They don’t give time for the system to do anything.

But Batman? The man took on the role of a *detective* in his vigilante work. He doesn’t decide who lives or dies, he just works his ass off to stop them from killing people, from doing more damage than they already did.

If the system wasn’t rigged, Gotham might actually have already seen a difference being made.

“I think so too.” Peter replies. Benny glances over at him. Whatever is on Peter’s face makes the man smile, and he reaches over with soapy hands to ruffle Peter’s hair.

“Ain’t it past your damn bedtime?”

“I don’t *have* a bedtime, I’m practically an adult.”

“Uh huh. Sure. Pass me that pan.”

-

Here’s the thing: now that Peter has his webshooters stocked up and the Jumping Radar is at a working prototype, he has very little reason to not go out as Spider-Man.

Okay, he might have *some* reasons. But those are personal; they don’t *count*.

Like how he’s actually kinda sorta terrified of what’ll happen if or when Batman finds out about him being a “meta.”

He’s met Batman, Red Hood, Nightwing, Red Robin and Spoiler in person. And he may not have gotten up close and *talked* to Signal yet, but Peter has seen him in passing. There’s been nothing to indicate a threat. And clearly, Batman has some sort of no killing rule, much the same that Peter does.

But that meta thing?

It *feels* like something he should still be worried about. Because like, the rule *must* be important, if the wiki had that information but barely anything else. They can only give vague descriptions of their suits and the timeline is more confusing than it should be, but the one thing they know for certain is the “no meta” rule.

Batman doesn’t kill, but what happens instead? Would Peter be welcomed, truly welcome, or would it go wrong? Peter is gonna be walking right into the line of fire, if he doesn’t play his cards right.

(He just prays that whatever fight he has with this guy ends up a quiet and quick affair and he never has to worry about Batman or the other vigilantes at all.)

There's that creeping paranoia that wraps around him at all sides when he even sort of considers coming clean. It smells like antiseptic and burns like a knock off super soldier serum that almost killed him.

~~let me go let me go let me go~~

Peter isn't willing to let anyone get close enough to experiment on him like that again. Even if they act like awkward dads and stalk him out of care for his well being.

(He knows how fucking stupid he sounds.)

But again, those are *personal* reasons. And if there's one thing Peter knows, it's that he can't be a hero if he's a little chicken bitch. Hence, very little reason to not go out as Spider-Man.

He should *want* to help people- he *does* want to help people. He feels like such a waste of space when he turns the other cheek to crime these last few days. Ever since Peter became Spider-Man, his first instinct was to jump into the fray. And man, he can't stop thinking about how *useless* he'd been when that woman was jumped.

Peter had been forced to go get help, to play victim, when he had every ability to jump into the fray and do it himself. If he had been back home, he could have done exactly that. Especially before Tony took him in.

When he was Parker, he wore the suit under his day clothes all the time, kept his mask stuffed in his pockets and always had his web shooters on. He wasn't going to school so he didn't have to worry about people figuring out that way. He could either be Parker or be Spider-Man at the drop of a mask.

That night in the alley, he was a coward. That could have cost that woman her *life*.

And while he had been trying not to place that burden on himself, it's hard. He became Spider-Man out of a desperate attempt to heed Ben's last advice to him, the day that he died. Spider-Man is a responsibility, one that Peter was granted as a gift.

The nighttime doesn't give him a long enough break to consider anything else.

Peter had a nightmare. It started as most do. A dream, being back home.

He had been sitting on the sofa in the lounge, listening to Steve and Dr. Banner bicker about TV shows. Natasha was asleep next to him, tucked underneath a soft quilted blanket that she and Peter were sharing. He thinks that he was working on something, there was metal and wire on the table in front of him, but he can't recall what it was exactly.

There was a snag in his project that he couldn't work through. He was careful to not jostle the couch and wake Natasha, and the voices from the kitchen behind him pattered out as Peter walked down the hall. He felt so *tired* in his dream, and his throat hurt. Not like a sore throat, but like something was crushing it.

~~It was getting hard to breathe.~~

His feet were moving too slow. Every step forward was in slow motion, like his feet were glued to the floor. The hallway kept getting bigger, and he stopped to watch the doors duplicate, adding and adding and adding more doors, stretching miles wide. He tried to turn back to go home, but was met with the sight of an alley and a smoking crater.

Peter coughed and forced himself to go down the hall instead- Tony should be behind one of the doors.

But he wasn't. No matter how many doors Peter opened, the rooms remained empty. That is, until Peter started seeing everyone *but* Tony.

Behind one door was Two-Face, standing in a warehouse with one half of the room in shadow from busted lights. He flipped a coin into the air, caught it, and he said, "*Well it looks as though the odds aren't in your favor.*" Peter closed that door and searched another, met with the sight of Batman and the Batmobile. He reached out and held Peter's shoulder. "*You aren't alone in this.*"

Another, and Red Robin was carrying Spoiler away from him, but the alley was smeared in blood and he could hear the wind howling in his ears. Another, and Peter was in a laboratory full of smoke and one of the other missing kids on the ground, eyes unseeing. Another, and Peter was met with a bathroom full of brown locks of hair and a crying baby, *screaming*, red in the face for someone to help him out of there.

"Please, please don't hurt him again! Please, someone help me! Someone help him- my Uncle- Please-"

But when Peter went to grab the kid, his hand turned to ash.

He had to get out of there. He was now checking the doors for a way to escape, ignoring Batman and Nightwing and Red Hood asking him "*What's going on?*", what they can do to help him.

Another door, and he was in the dark waiting for May to come find him.

Another door, and Ben was on the ground, trying to cover a 10 year old Peter with his body and shield him from the gunman.

Another door, and Dolores Basset was under the pool tarp.

Another door, and he was holding onto Karen's hand even though she had already been crushed by falling debris.

Another door, and Neri was *screaming* for Peter to save her. He kept hearing her begging even as he ran to the next door, which was just the empty sky over the Atlantic Ocean. Endless blue and white. And for some reason, Nightwing was trying to pull him away from the room. Peter said he was sorry and he let go, because he was *desperate* to get out and away from the people he couldn't save, and Nightwing's scream was horrifying when he tried to catch Peter-

That's when he woke up.

Peter rubs his eyes with one hand, sitting on the ceiling of his room. He's wearing his spider-suit, but holding the mask in his other hand. The Jumping Radar is fitted to his forearm, blinking up at him with the ready screen: *Start program with voice command.*

It feels comforting to be in the suit, to know that his webshooters are primed and ready to start swinging. He's gotten enough sleep, he had a good meal, he has a general idea of where to go and what to do.

Even better: Peter doesn't feel any eyes on him, tracking what he's doing and where he's going and who he's talking to. He doesn't know if that means the Bats gave up on him, or if they're just busy, but for Peter, it means that he has an opportunity to take.

But that nightmare is refusing to leave his mind, so Peter has to take a moment.

He's had the nightmare before, just... not like that. Not so Gotham-y. It always goes like this: he's somewhere safe, somewhere warm and protected, and where he didn't feel the pressure weighing on him. And then he's in that damn hallway, trying to get through all of the doors and find a way out.

Peter shivers.

He *despises* that nightmare. It's directly a copy of the night that Peter was bitten by the spider, just that the hallway will be somewhere else every time. It circles back to mock him every time Peter takes a break from Spider-Man. All of the people he hadn't managed to save, before and after he became Spider-Man.

It's a hallway of his failures. Likely because every poor hero needs a reminder of their incompetence.

Seeing that woman and having to rely on someone else to help her felt so awful that Peter couldn't really shake the fuzzy feeling in his brain. All because he hadn't put on the costume, all because he was a coward and had to run to someone else for help, that woman *could* have died.

That's the 'what if' that *really* matters to Peter. What if there's another family torn apart because he wasn't there? What if some other kid loses his parents before he even gets to know them? What if Peter can't be strong enough, can't carry the responsibility he has to help people? What if he can't do that right, and Ben will have died teaching Peter a lesson that was useless, in the end, all because Peter was a useless kid?

"Alright, kid, let's have a chat." Peter puts his hands on his knees, closing his eyes. If the voice he's pulling is like Tony's, *fuck off*, he's stressing.

"You had a rough night, don't let it freak you out. So what if you think you wouldn't be able to keep up with Gotham, or a some crazy mutant or enhanced guy who tried to kill you, or some dumb Batman or his dumb list of Robins? And who cares that you were already questioning what you want Spider-Man to be before you got sucked into an alternate

dimension, and now you feel like you're going to make a *monumental* mistake, because you're a dumb kid who makes mistakes all the time-

Okay, maybe this pep talk isn't working. He should reroute.

"Ugh, um..."

Peter is at a loss for words. Where does he start?

"...*We all go through periods where we aren't living up to our own stupid expectations, it's annoying, but that's life.*" Peter remembers Pepper telling him that once. They'd been sitting outside of a conference room, sitting side by side on a bench. Peter had just taken the test to get into Midtown, and he didn't know if he was up to being the kid that all of these adults wanted him to be.

Pepper had held his hand and told him about the times that she felt inadequate. Where she wondered if she'd ever really live up to her own idea of what she wanted.

"We... all have moments where we think we won't be able to reach the goals we have. But that's when it's the most important to step up and keep your focus."

He feels his shoulders relax. The unsettled feeling is still there. There have been many, many times where Peter has failed. But he became Spider-Man for a *reason*, and that reason was to help people. But... He's never done *this* before.

That's the biggest reason he's so hesitant.

Spider-Man doesn't have an arch nemesis. He doesn't think any of the people that he fights *count* as one. Leap Frog, Armadillo? They're villains of the week at best, and like, to be honest, Peter has actually *scheduled* fights with them before.

It's true. They know he's young, and they've never really wanted to do more than cause chaos. Maybe it's because he isn't the police? Whatever their reasons, Peter has always had a sort of camaraderie with his villains that both surprise and bemuse his mentors. He's mentioned before that his hardest enemy to fight is Black Cat, and they also have some sort of frenemy thing going on.

He's never had a fight like this, where the stakes are raised so high. A fight that feels too big on his shoulders... Unless he counts the man that killed Ben.

But even then, that was a *normal* guy. Peter's experience with other enhanced people are the Avengers. They've trained him, they've built him up, they try to make him think ahead. They have handed him a lot of the tools of the trade, and he... Never considered that he'd actually *use* them some day.

Isn't that terrifying?

Some part of Peter must have felt like there would never be a day where he'd have to *use* the skills he's learned from his mentors to fight someone who is aiming to kill him, and has *all* of the ability to do that.

Ghost hands crush at Peter's neck. He thinks of the wind in his ears, the blue sky and white clouds. How he thought *this is it*.

He also looks at the nanobracelet on his wrist. Tony's work, the proof that he went running the second Peter needed him.

And then, the most important piece of advice he'd ever gotten slips out with a breath.

"That's all it is, Peter." He remembers someone reaching out their arms. Their face has long since blurred, unable to stick around because of the lack of photos. But he knows they were strong, and they would catch him when he jumped.

-

Whoa.

His breath catches in his throat. His feet toe the edge of the building- literally. He's so close to stepping off, that he can feel the edge of the roof under his shoes. His hair is ruffled by the wind that whips around him, teetering him closer to the edge. The city lights blink up at him, all of them a sign of an individual life.

He's scared. His heart feels like it's stuck in his throat, and his stomach is not agreeing with his choice. Why'd he have to pick such a tall building for this? Shouldn't he start smaller? Safer? Or, as safe as it can be?

No, it had to be like this. He can't chicken out now, he's done all of the testing he can while on the ground. Why is he trying to talk himself out of this?

Maybe because the ground looks so, so far away, and Peter feels really small. Really vulnerable. Maybe because his parents died from a fall, so why is he trying to tempt fate? Is he suicidal or just stupid? He doesn't have the answer to that one.

Or maybe he does. There's a large part of him that's screaming that he's being stupid, that he needs to stop trying to play hero. Who does he think he is, wearing a mask over his face and a hoodie he slapped a spider-symbol on with sharpie? Does he think he's Tony Stark, or Captain America? That he's some invulnerable super soldier or a genius inventor?

He's just a dumb kid.

Peter closes his eyes, fighting back the urge to step away from the edge.

And in his mind, he replays the only videos they had on VCR. He watched them so often as a kid, before they were lost in the Battle of Manhattan, that the videos were burned into his mind's eye much the same as they had burned onto that old TV. His grandparents had been gymnasts and trapeze artists, and Peter had been a kid with asthma and glasses itching to try and fly like they did.

They never seemed scared. They stood above it all, waving down with genuine smiles on their faces. May used to pinch his cheek and say, "Dimples run on your Dad's side!" They made

the art look easy, look accomplishable, even though Peter knew it was so difficult. That's why they were the best in the world, before they died.

There was an interview in the box of tapes, that Peter would play when he wanted to pretend his grandpa's voice was his dad's. In that tape, the interviewer asked them how they could be so confident in their ability. What did it take to trust someone so well, to know they'd catch you?

Peter opens his eyes again. He steps off the edge, and he learns to fly.

-

"It's a leap of faith."

Why the *hell* is he letting his inexperience take over his confidence? He wants to go *home*, he wants to be far away from this, and he can *not* just sit on his ass anymore. He can't wait for someone to come do the hard part for him. Who fucking cares that Peter isn't ready for this?

None of his mentors were ready. No one is, when the time comes to step up. This villain didn't care that Peter wasn't ready for this, but that's on par for the course, isn't it? Peter has always been used to life beating him down, one swing after the other. Life doesn't let you get back up sometimes. And when that happens, Peter's found that fighting dirty and pulling the fight down with him works wonders.

It's time to take matters into his own hands. He can do this.

He can do this.

Peter puts on his mask and he climbs out of his window. There's a crackle of lightning overhead. He feels the pull of his stomach as he lets himself free fall for the first few seconds, and then he swings out into the street, determination coursing through him.

-

It takes him some time to get used to swinging again before making himself get *out* there, out there. He jumps between buildings, memorizing the hold on different Gotham architecture, what feels more solid and what would crumble under his hand. He listens to the city breathe, he grows comfortable among her shadows and among her whispers.

He feels stupid for being so hesitant to get back out there.

The nightmare is all but gone from his mind as he leaps 20 feet through the air, the sprinkle of rain accompanying his dance. Being in his suit after *all* that time out of it? Peter feels *free*. Free enough to spread his wings, free enough to breathe. This is what he's been missing in this equation: he wasn't exactly Parker, but he didn't really feel like Peter either. But there's someone in between the two identities of his that has always been the bridge of that gap, that connects them to each other: Spider-Man.

When he's Spider-Man, he isn't Peter *or* Parker. He's someone else- he can be someone *braver*, tougher, and smarter. He can be someone kinder. He becomes someone who can't get

angry, someone who can help people and it make a difference in their lives. So that there's no more doors with no more failures, no more people he let down.

Spider-Man is what Peter and Parker could never be. Peter died with Spider-Man, and Spider-Man gave Parker the means to become who he is.

He *missed this*. It's only been ten days but it feels like a life time to him.

Peter holds his arms out in the free fall, feeling that leap in his stomach as he gets closer to the ground. When he latches his webbing onto a building nearby, he flicks his wrist down and uses the momentum to flip in the air. A laugh lets loose above the traffic and a few heads tilt up to try and find him, but he's already gone.

The ability to be free, able to almost *fly*. But it wouldn't be fun just to fly- he likes the feeling of jumping, of spinning, of twirling in the air. When feet hit wall and the world tips sideways, he's at his most comfortable. He craves the itch of it, wants to get out and show off, like his grandparents got to do.

But he holds himself back. It isn't a show, no, and he's not going to be reckless. Right now, he has something important to do. And that's catching that villain that brought him here.

He runs along the side of an office building, getting used to sticky feet on Gotham's differing style- it's not like New York, but he can get the hang of it. He had refrained from walking on walls and ceilings when he was Peter just in case eyes had fallen on him again and he didn't sense it. But as Spider-Man, he can chuckle when someone points up at him to show their friends what they're seeing.

Peter missed that, too. New Yorkers seeing him in person for the first time, and then eventually hearing that he was a tourist attraction in a way. People wanted to spot him flying and jumping around buildings, and sometimes Peter couldn't help but get fancy with it. The exclamations when they'd finally spot him, the excitement when he got close.

(He doesn't miss paparazzi or being famous or anything, that was never fun and he often avoided it. But he misses New York, he misses *Queens*, with people who recognize him.)

Peter keeps his eyes out for signs, a voice he knows, or the beeping of the Jumping Radar on his arm. He can't exactly feel the tugging of his spider-sense, but he also is starting to think that this villain isn't hanging out near the Upper East Side, where Peter has been living. He *had* seen the man in the Diamond District, trying to get inside Wayne Industries. If Peter were a villain who just got dissed by a billionaire, he would head there at night to get inside and steal what he wanted so badly.

So Peter starts in that direction, swinging towards the bridge when his spider senses go off.

!!! watch out !!!

In the street below him, a young woman is holding out her gun in a stand-off with an older man. The two of them are arguing with each other, the man gesturing wildly with the gun and the woman flinching each time. At the woman's hip, a young girl is hiding in her skirts.

Spider-Man cuts off that little voice in his head. He thwips the webs in their direction, grabbing both of the guns and flinging them up into the air. The woman screams when her gun is yanked upwards, and she takes several steps back to hunch over her daughter. Peter webs the guns onto the side of the building as all three gawk up at him in shock, jaws slack and fear flashing in their eyes.

“Hate to break it to you, but there *is* enough room in town for the both of you.” He lands on soft feet and walks down the side of the building towards them.

The man’s face goes deathly pale. Spider-Man opens his mouth to ask what the problem is, but the man turns on his feet and sprints off in the opposite direction down the street as if his life depends on it. The woman breathes out a huge sigh of relief, grabbing onto her daughter and tugging her close. But when she spots Spider-Man, her guard goes up just as fast as it had fallen. She takes another few steps back from him.

“Don’t worry!” He brings his voice to a softer tone, just like Uncle Ben taught him when being polite. He also raises his hands so she can see there’s nothing in them. “I’m not here to hurt anyone. I’m Spider-Man.”

“Spider-Man?” She repeats her eyes drag over him warily, still hiding her kid from view. However, there’s little success in that, because the young girl is trying to see Spider-Man from around the skirt.

Her eyes widen when Spider-Man waves at her, and one tiny hand lets go of skirt so she can wave back at him. The woman moves her daughter’s head back out of view, her voice sharp and filled with uncertainty.

“A-Are you new? I’ve never heard of you.”

“You can say that.” He shrugs, jumping down to be on street level with her. Her eyes fall down to Peter’s height as if she expected him to be taller. “I’m new *here*.”

“...Are you a Robin?” She asks, looking him up and down again. Likely to see if he has a bat or a bird symbol on him somewhere. Nope- just the spider on his chest. Hopefully, that doesn’t make him lose any points.

“Nah, I’m not. But we’re on the same side. Ish.” He makes a so-so motion. “Is it okay if I walk you guys back home? It’s dark out, and you know, people have guns.”

He points being him at the wall, where her gun sticks out of the webbing. The woman’s mouth presses into a thin line of discontent, and she blurts out: “It’s just for self-defense.”

“I know.”

She repeats in a sterner tone, “I *don’t* want to hurt anyone.”

“...I know.” Peter says a little softer. The young girl has peeked her head back out again, wonder in her eyes and her jaw dropped when she sees the guns on the wall. “There are

people you gotta protect. Trust me, I get it.”

The woman is close to tears, and she grips the girl’s shoulders in an effort to still her shaking hands. The girl leans into her mother’s leg, but is watching Peter in unwavering interest. The type of focus that a kid only gets when they aren’t supposed to.

“Mamă?” The little girl whispers, and her mother smiles at her thinly, still shaken up. Her eyes drift back towards the guns, and Peter does as well.

“Can I get...?”

It leaves a sour taste in his mouth, because Peter *really* hates guns. But he certainly doesn’t think he should *leave* them there. and he’s not exactly able to tell her she can’t have her *own* gun, even if Peter hates it. If she wants her gun back, she wants it back. Now, if it was Queens, he’d let the police handle that. But he doesn’t want to do that in *Gotham* of all places. Police are already corrupt, but it’s even worse here.

He takes both down from the wall, handing her back her own with the safety on. He crushes the other one in his hand, the metal bending like play dough. The young girl’s eyes widen, and she points at Peter with a gleeful shout. “Dikh, Mamă! Kon si but zuralo!”

The woman stares at Peter’s hand, her face a little pale from the show of strength. Oops. Her eyes follow Peter as he walks towards the trashcan nearby, dumping the crumpled gun away. He imagines that when he looks back, she’ll be in the middle of running off, or she’ll still be wary.

Instead, he turns around and she’s putting her gun away, securely hidden in her jacket. She smiles down at her daughter, then crouches in front of her. “Yes, he is very strong. He’s going to walk us home, isn’t that nice of Spider-Man?”

She gestures for Peter to come closer, and he does. He squats down in front of the little girl, shaking her hand. The girl’s eyes are full of stars, and her grip is surprisingly strong. Peter smiles underneath the mask, patting her hand gently.

“Introduce yourself, Scumpete.” The woman gently prods the young girl. The girl looks between him and her mother, then back to Peter.

“I am Analetta!” The young girl shouts, showing off a bright smile with two missing teeth. She gleams with confidence, as if she’d practiced introducing herself before. “Nice to meet you! Spider-Man!”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Analetta.” Peter holds back a laugh, trying to sound majorly impressed. “You’ve got a nice handshake!”

Analetta beams. Her mother stands back up. Peter notes the tension has released from her shoulders, though she always keeps her eyes on the road around them, on alert. She doesn’t sound like she’s *from* Gotham, but she acts like she’s lived here a while. “I’m Florence. Thank you, Spider-Man, for helping us out.”

“Carry?” Analetta interrupts, reaching her hands up towards Peter.

“Analetta, no, Spider-Man doesn’t want to carry you.”

“He’s strong!” Analetta points out. She’s far from wrong.

“Piggy back rides are my specialty.” Peter states. He glances up at Florence. “If mom says it’s okay.”

“Yes, she does!” Analetta doesn’t give her mother time to agree. She runs around and jumps onto Peter’s back, giggling when she settles in for the ride. Peter stands back up, ignoring how tight her arms are around his neck. He’s given enough piggy back rides to neighborhood kids and old foster siblings to be used to getting strangled, he supposes.

“See, Mamă?” She says, peeking at her mother from around Peter’s head. “Strong!”

“I know.” Florence grins thinly, pale like she’s a few minutes away from passing out from exhaustion. A hand reaches up to her temple, and Peter decides it’d be better to get them home now rather than later.

“Where we headed, ma’am?”

“Corner of Baker and Rose.” Florence starts their walk, but she sticks nearby to keep an eye on Analetta. She doesn’t trust Peter with Analetta completely, and that’s a smart decision. Not because Peter is going to snatch a kid any time soon, but because if she wasn’t concerned about a strange meta boy who may or may not be with the Bats potentially stealing her kid, Peter would be weirded out.

Analetta is the first to break the silence. She leans to ask loudly in Peter’s ear, “How come strong?”

“I’m a meta.” Peter doesn’t flinch at how loud she is, but it’s a near thing. Florence’s feet falter, but she continues as though she hadn’t hesitated. What’s that about?

“Meta?” Analetta repeats curiously. “Like Signal?”

“Yeah, like he is.” Though Peter doubts if that’s *really* the case. Maybe he should be doing more research on what a meta *is*. He hadn’t thought to look that up. Peter is classified as a mutant because of how he got his powers, are metas the same thing?

Analetta hums in thought. “Hero?”

“Yeah, I try.” Peter can sense Florence’s gaze turning back on him.

...curious

“How come spider?”

“Cause I’m a spider.” Peter replies, and he hears Analetta make a noise of discontent that she tries to hide. Peter grins, though she can’t see it under her mask. “Are you scared of spiders?”

Analetta pauses, but then she states proudly, “No, I am not!”

“Yes you are.” Florence raises a brow at her daughter. “You’re terrified of them.”

“Spider-Man is a spider.” Analetta states as if this makes sense. “I’m not scared anymore.”

“It’s okay to be scared of spiders.” Peter tells her. Analetta sets her chin on his shoulder, fully relaxed in his hold. Besides the death grip she’s got on his throat, but still. Peter wonders what it is about him that kids seem to inherently trust.

“I was scared of spiders too, for a while. They’re a little creepy looking, aren’t they?” Peter admits to her. Analetta mulls this over.

“Yes.” She agrees. “Don’t like their legs. Too many. They don’t need them.”

“If it helps, most spiders want nothing to do with humans.” He says as they turn the corner. Peter keeps his spider-senses on alert for nearby danger, but there’s only the distant humming that tells him everything is Gotham-normal danger. “They’ll leave you alone if you leave them alone. They can’t really hurt you.”

“Really?”

“Yep. And if a big, scary spider tries to bother you, just come find me.” Peter tells her. Florence huffs under her breath as if the notion is ridiculous. And it might be, because he can’t be there all the time. But maybe he can get a burner phone and give people that number? He’ll remember Florence’s address and bring her the number when he gets that set up. “I’ll come and tell it not to bother you.”

“You talk to spiders?”

“All the time.”

“Because you’re a spider?”

“Yeap.” He nods.

He expects the next question to be, “*What do spiders talk about?*” like all young children ask. But Analetta is ahead of the curve. No, she asks what every adult at some point has either asked in horror, curiosity, or has joked about:

“Do you have butt webs?”

“No.”

“Bummer.”

“Ah, well, not in my opinion.” Peter is glad for the mask, because his face flushes bright red when Florence barks out a laugh. “And also, has nothing to do with bums.”

The walk towards Baker and Rose is a long one, filled with question after question from Analetta. However, with each question, the girl's eyes droop more and more, and she yawns through half of them. She sets her cheek on Peter's shoulder, and eventually her voice putters out into tiny snores.

Florence ignores the button to cross the street, simply striding through the crosswalk. She tucks back for a second to brush Analetta's hair back from her face with a smile. "It usually takes three hours of a lot of convincing to get her to fall asleep. Is that a superpower of yours?"

"Maybe, but it's probably unrelated to the spider thing." Peter has always been good with kids, so this doesn't surprise him.

"You have siblings?" She puts her hands in her pockets, glancing towards the sky.

"Foster siblings." Peter smiles warmly at the thought of a few of them.

In his very first placement- the one that wanted to adopt him, Karen and Devon- there was his older brother Chandler. Peter had been ten years old and Chandler was sixteen, but he never treated Peter like a nuisance of a little kid. In fact, it had been Chandler who had taught Peter ASL. Chandler had lost his hearing when he was young, and Peter had periods of time where he couldn't talk at all.

Neri was his foster sister that Peter grew very attached to, much like she had grown attached to him. She was younger than him, and she didn't mind the periods where Peter just couldn't bring himself to talk.

They had both...

Though for the most part, Peter's foster siblings were good to him, there were a couple houses with older kids that weren't as kind. There was one where he had his arm broken and he gained a concussion, and another where they pulled a lot of mean "pranks" on him that made him not want to go to school.

Like one where they put gum in his hair, and considering the texture of his hair (wavy, but with a few parts that seem like they *might* be curls if he cared about his hair), his foster parent at the time just took him to the barber and they cut it extremely short, almost buzzed. He felt naked for weeks.

Florence nods in understanding. "She's going to bother me for weeks about when you can next come visit. She did that for Robin a few months ago."

"I can swing by." Peter assures, already thinking to add it to his list of to-do's.

"You're a vigilante, Spider-Man. I'm sure you have much more important things to do than come visit us." Florence purrs with amusement.

"I might be a vigilante, but I enjoy this side of it more. Knowing people, and being able to help them out with anything. Besides, your family *is* important."

The corners of Florence's eyes crinkle when she smiles warmly at him. She almost reaches her hand out to touch Peter's head, but he hesitates and drops it to stroke her daughter's hair. Her smile grows sad, and she looks in front of her as they walk. "You sound mature, but you're a kid, aren't you? Like Robin is. Like they all were."

Peter recalls reading the timelines and the wiki's general idea of where they might come from. Not much is known about their specific ages, but telling from the time and the descriptions, 'Robin' has been multiple people- all of them kids or teenagers, like Peter.

He supposes from an adult perspective that should be worrying. But from Peter's... He himself is a teenage vigilante. And he doesn't know Batman's perspective on that. He *could* be raising a child army or something, but honestly, it might just track that Batman found these kids who were doing dangerous shit and decided to train them because he knew they weren't gonna stop.

That's what *Tony* did, after all. Why else would Peter be allowed to go out as Spider-Man still? He knows that Peter would just fuck off and find a different way to do that, and it'd take throwing him in a facility to stop him. And even then, Peter would get out.

(He always finds a way.)

"You don't like that?"

"No, not at all." Florence admits without hesitation, actually breathing a sigh of relief that Peter asked and she didn't have to bring it up first. "You should be doing kid things, you should be sleeping at night instead of risking your life."

They've come across a line of apartment buildings now, and there's small signs that this area is full of people with kids- bikes heavily chained together and connected to a series of different fences. Hopscotch games on the sidewalk, drawings of vigilantes and the sun, clouds, ducks and cakes all in brightly colored chalk.

And then they stop at a pink house, with lights on inside. There's people milling around the house, mostly women. A young boy presses his face against the glass, nose smushed and his breath fogging the glass, and his eyes go wide when he spots Peter.

"*Mama, come look!*" The boy is saying. Peter passes Analetta off to her mother, holding her head in a gentle manner so she doesn't get jostled awake. Analetta buries her face into her mother's neck, and Florence cradles her close, her eyes on Peter.

"I wouldn't change what I do for anything." Peter hopes she can hear his smile, his determination, even through the voice modulator. "Someone I love taught me once that we all have a responsibility to help each other. I was given a gift, I can't waste that."

Florence hums in thought, glancing up at her house with her nosy family members peeking through the window. They wave at her, pointing at Spider-Man and asking *Who's that? What's going on? Is that a Robin?*

Peter is torn on that- on one hand, he doesn't want to and shouldn't go around telling people that he's a Robin. Because he's *not*, and not only is it lying, it's not who Peter is. On the other, Florence trusted him because she thought he was connected to Batman and his Robins.

"You should come visit." Florence decides, looking back at Peter. "We'd love to have you, Spider-Man."

His chest surges with victory and happiness. *This* is what Spider-Man is. He's the one that shows up at the house to make sure you're doing okay, he's the one that does all the heavy lifting for everyone, the one that helps with flower pots and plays with the little kids, knows their names, so that if they ever need him, he can be there.

"I'd love to, ma'am." He waves at the window. A couple of them wave back, and the little boy grabs his mother to point out what they all saw him do.

Florence waves goodbye and she enters the house, immediately bombarded by the cacophony of family members wanting to know what was going on. The noise grows muffled when the door shuts, and Peter settles with a sense of belonging.

Gotham deserves that difference, that change, that the vigilantes are trying to make.

Peter claps his hands together, turning on his heel and facing the street. Everything is fine here now, so it's time for Peter to start looking for another set of people to help. Maybe he should go check out closer to Robinson Park, or the University District? There's bound to be drunk college teens in need of a spider friend to get them ho-

The screeching of tires cuts off that thought. *LOOK IT!* screams his spider sense, but he doesn't need it to tell him fucking anything, because if he somehow managed to miss the bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle careen towards the light pole on front of the apartments, he'd make an eye appointment.

He puts his hands on his hips, watching a group of seven teens (how did they even fit in there?) tumble out one by one, phones in hand and already freaking out.

"At least my first night out as Spider-Man isn't lame and boring." Peter tells himself, then he jogs over to the scene, where the driver is folding herself over the hood of the car and crying. "Hey, folks! Did you know this is a no parking zone?"

-

Something is off with Gotham tonight.

...Listen, Tim has been running around Gotham since he was 9 goddamn years old. And not because he was Robin at the time- no, he wasn't like Dick, he didn't put on the cape officially until he was 13 and desperate to prove he was a useful kid.

(He'll unpack that trauma on his deathbed, now is not the time.)

He was 9 years old and stalking Batman and Robin with stars in his eyes, but he was dead clever, not a spacey child caught in a daydream. He had to keep his wits about him if he

wanted to survive each night. The second he got stuck in his head and stopped paying attention, he would either get mugged, or kidnapped, or, in reality, nearly fall off of a building. He got to know Gotham like he knows his camera settings: familiar, muscle memory, beloved.

Gotham is crazy in the way that it reminds Tim of a grandmother who *definitely* killed your grandfather a thousands years ago but no one talks about it because your grandfather was the Worst Person Alive and she was just reclaiming her life from his meaty, fugly hands. And she got away with it too, so what's the point of bringing it up all the time? She's the matriarch of the family and she loves you despite all of the various mental illnesses that was passed along oh-so-lovingly in the family bloodline.

Point being: Tim knows her, and she knows him because he's her deeply disturbed and needy grandchild, and Gotham is *home*. So of course he has a sixth sense for when something is Off.

He can't quite put it together though. Because Gotham is at it's typical, all night. He caught someone littering and told them off, he talked someone out of using cocaine before swimming, he stopped a few muggings, he busted a guy's nose for taking a swing at his teenager while he was piss drunk. And now Jason is knocking the heads together of a group of guys who thought they could harass the working girls without consequences.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

So why does it feel like something is happening, and he can't figure it out?

"Earth to Red Robin," Babs chimes in his ear. *"Got something on your mind?"*

"Huh? No, not really. Just... something in the air, I guess." Tim squints at the skyline, waiting for Jason to hurry up so they can move on. They're supposed to be keeping their eyes out for signs of Firefly, but duty has called a few times and they're stuck taking care of things like this.

"Uh oh, you got a feeling?" Tim can tell she's paused her typing.

Ugh, Tim hates when they think of his logic and thinking as a 'gut feeling.' He's just putting together clues, that's what all gut feelings are- the subconscious mulling over and processing what is known, and forming ideas before comprehending the thought.

But that's a fight for another time.

"...A little."

"Is it Firefly? You think he's gonna get up to something tonight?"

"...I don't think so? It's just one of those things." Tim sighs, leaning back on the roof and swinging his feet. "I don't have any evidence to back it up."

"Back what up?" Babs replies, sounding exhausted despite it only being 11PM. *"Gonna fill me in on what's twisting your ear?"*

Tim hums, taking a moment to think it over. He doesn't even know *what* it is that has him on edge. No, not even 'on edge', that doesn't sound like what he's got going on. More like something is going on, something shifted.

"Gotham feels like it's to the left."

"...*To the left...*" Babs clicks her teeth. "*Gonna be honest with you double-R, I have no idea what the hell you're on about.*"

"Neither do I. That's why I said it's not anything big."

Though, Tim does observe the streets once more. Jason is talking with some of the working girls, probably letting the new girl down there know of the one clinic nearby that is trustworthy. There's not a lot of traffic tonight, even though it's a Friday in October, when all the college kids get in the last of their partying before Finals and Winter Break.

Actually, maybe that's what it is...

It's quiet. On a Friday. In Gotham.

"Huh."

"*You figured something out.*" Babs groans, as if it's Tim's fault that he's usually right.

"Can't say it out loud."

Jason grapples up to the roof, lifting himself up with one hand to join Tim on the ledge. He taps the side of his helmet to listen to comms, shaking his head when he hears Babs' groan of immediate understanding. "*Shit, it is, isn't it?*"

"What is what?" Jason turns to Tim for an explanation.

Tim smiles thinly. "Can't say it out loud."

Jason cusses.

The 'curse' that every one of them believes in but most of them will not admit to: Never, ever, not in a million years, say that it's a 'quiet night.' At least, not out loud. Because that is asking for the ground to crack open and let loose all of hell onto Gotham for at *least* a week.

"We can ignore it." Jason comments, looking out on the city as if he could find something to blame. "It's not happening if we don't pay attention."

"You know what? You're right. It doesn't exist if we aren't looking at it."

"Exactly, Baby Bird." Jason claps his shoulder, and they nod in understanding.

"*You're both going to eat your words. That's my gut feeling.*" Babs states dryly, and Tim can imagine she's wheeling herself towards her coffee maker in preparation.

“Well, excuse us if we try not to live every day paranoid, Oracle.” Jason replies snottily. There’s silence from both Tim and Babs for a few debilitating seconds, but everything is being said anyway. Tim raises an eyebrow at Jason, who runs a hand down his face (his helmet), and he points at Tim. “Maybe *don’t* remind me of this family, dude.”

Tim just purses his lips in reply. He doesn’t have to tell *Jason Todd* that everyone in the family is majorly paranoid and levels of insane that should be tested. They’ll just continue to blame B for that silently in their heads, like most of everything that they do.

“*Crap.*” They hear Babs breathe out, and a second later, Bruce’s voice filters through the comms as well.

“*Oracle, did you just get that?*”

“*I did, I did. Already pulling up security in that area.*”

“What? What happened?” Tim wishes for the universe to give them one night that is quiet and stays that way.

“*B and Robin just visited Commissioner Gordon. He showed them a sticky note that was left at the sight of a reckless driving case on the corner of Baker and Rose, and then another that was left with a mugger. All it has on it is a... drawing?*”

Babs lets out a laugh, and B grows annoyed. “*Oracle.*”

“*I’m sorry, but that’s kinda cute! It’s really hastily drawn doodles of the people that were involved, and signed with a doodle of a spider.*” Babs tells them, still chuckling under her breath. “*It’s a cute way to leave a report for the police without being there.*”

“*There’s someone in Gotham acting as a vigilante without our knowledge.*” B is not happy about this. Tim stands up, already anticipating Batman’s next sentence. “*Red Robin, the sighting was in the Upper East Side. Go to Baker and Rose and gather witness reports. Everyone needs to keep an eye out for this individual.*”

“Not it.” Jason pushes himself backwards and stands up, heading the opposite direction. “I got my own shit to catch up on.”

“Swinging by Peter’s?” Tim asks, and Jason scoffs.

“I have a lot of things to do other than stalk a 12 year old, dude.”

“He said he was 14.”

“That doesn’t make it any better. You know that, right?” Jason stops to look at him with all the sass of a former theater kid. Fuckhead. Tim could end his whole career if he pointed that out.

“...But you’re gonna swing by Peter’s.”

“Maybe, if I have *time*.” Jason shakes his head. “You’re headed that way right now, *you* go do it.”

“I just got a different case.” Tim reminds him. Because they both know once Tim focuses on this vigilante, he’ll put anything else on the back burner until he’s at least got something of worth to report back about.

Jason groans loudly, waving his hands animatedly. “Fine, *fine*,” He has the nerve to act like Tim is twisting his leg despite the fact that he’s obviously going to go check on Peter if no one else is able to do it. “I’ll go check on the brat. But I ain’t lyin’, I got some other shit to attend to.”

He’s off before Tim could point out that the ‘other shit’ would just be the same thing he’d be doing with Peter- checking up on some kids who need help and a safe place to sleep, or get something to eat. Tim makes his way off of the roof, grappling out of the Bowery, trying to recall any other cases with a spider-theme he might have missed.

-

Bruce would really, sincerely, appreciate if children would stop becoming vigilantes.

He’s heard comments from his peers and jokes (and threats, mostly from Jason) from his kids, and more than a few people online like to point at it without the context and go, “*Batman employs child soldiers*.”

But he knows too damn well that these children, that everyone seems to think Bruce is picking up for the hell of it, would surely get themselves *killed* if Bruce wasn’t taking them in and mentoring them. Dick was his first lesson in that case. He just wanted to bring the boy home and help him get justice for his parents, only to realize quickly that Dick would become just like Bruce if he didn’t do something soon.

Barbara... he failed her in so, so many ways. He doesn’t understand how she could ever make her way towards forgiving him, trusting him. He saw her as foolish, as untrained, as a kid trying to play at a role, and not for what she *was*: a talented girl that would become a brilliant woman and hero.

And then Jason, his son... If Bruce could go back in time, he would convince Jason that he didn’t need to be Robin to be Bruce’s son. He feels stupid every day, when he remembers that he *lost* his boy because he’d failed to see how much Jason craved his attention. That wasn’t all it was, he knows that. Jason was a good, *happy* kid who was always a fierce protector. He protected his mother and the other kids before, and when he became Robin, he protected Gotham with the fire and passion of a kid that might really have been magic, just not how Jason expected.

Tim... Tim literally gave Bruce no choice.

That kid showed up Bruce’s house, grabbed him by the collar, and shook Bruce out of his grief induced depressive state. He did that every day for weeks, and when that didn’t work, he literally stole the Robin costume out of the glass case and saved Bruce and Dick, and from

there, Bruce promised he wouldn't let this child with no self preservation instincts and this *need* to prove that he's a useful and good kid die on him.

Stephanie gave Bruce heartache so strong that it felt as if she had carved out his chest with a knife. She wanted to prove to herself that she wasn't her father's daughter, that she was better than him. She wanted to stick in to everyone's faces that she could make a change in the world, and it terrified Bruce when her fire could almost get her killed.

He kept seeing Jason in her eyes- the same with Tim, but with Stephanie, it was because she was *just* like him. And he had nightmares about finding her in Jason's place, in some warehouse far, far away, that Bruce was seconds too late getting to.

Cass was a light that he wished to protect, but one that he had no right to keep on a shelf. She was more than capable of making her own decisions, and she had decided to change the course of her life to be better than her parents. And she *made* that work, she learned a language that none of them can understand.

And with Damian, Bruce missed... *so much*.

Stuck in the time stream for a year, losing his memory each time he got closer to home and regaining it just to lose it again. When he had left, Damian was the sharp edge of a glinting knife, he was desperate to live up to his mother's expectations. He craved the title that he had been told to covet, and Bruce wasn't *there* when Damian learned that the knife he was trained to be wasn't all he was.

Duke was spit-fire, he's a natural born leader, a genius just like his other children. Bruce had been terrified when he'd learned about the We Are Robin movement, but upon getting to know Duke, he saw a kid that needed to know who he was, what he could do so save people. He'd thankful every day that Duke decided to join them, to be on their team. He's not a Robin, he's his own hero.

Bruce had always wondered if he was absent, would his children fare better? Would they be set free of having to dig out Bruce's heart for a semblance of love? He often wishes he could lay out who he was and who he is just to prove to them that he loves them with his entire being.

He knows that when he was young, he was an outgoing child. But life and death stripped that away, and often, now, the words gather in him, but they refuse to leave. The boil down into overwhelming feelings, and that's when Bruce is the most lost.

He'd give anything for them to give up this life, to become as regular citizens as they can be. Bruce wants them to feel safe and at home, and even if they have been betrayed by the world, they could find solace in no longer being alone. However, he recognizes that it would be stripping them down of their will, and he has to let go of his fear if he wants to keep them *alive*.

There's a child out there right now, and Bruce can feel a cycle repeating.

Those sticky notes were all he needed in order to figure that out. The handwriting and the drawings on some of them indicated a level of juvenile that felt *just* like looking at a notebook for his kids' schoolwork. He wasn't at all surprised when Gordon informed him of the witness descriptions.

Bruce stares down at the docks below, frustrated not for the first time that he couldn't be in two places at once.

He *wants* to go out and track down this teenager and either stop this before the ball gets rolling, or figure out how in the world he's going to tell everyone about this without them immediately making the jokes that they do. Instead, he's forced to sit out the stakeout, because they got good information that Two-Face was connected to a shipment of explosives that were coming in, and Bruce needs to put a stop to this plan that's brewing.

Damian is settled next to him, underneath Bruce's cape to shield him from the sharp fall wind and the slight spattering of misty rain. A fog is settling in on the shipyard, gray and preventing their ability to see farther out than fifty feet into the water. Damian is working on a case, but he'd paused his reading a few moments ago.

"Peter."

...Not what Bruce expected the problem to be. "Peter?"

"He's withholding information. To all of you." Damian informs him as if Bruce wasn't very clear on that. "You had the perfect opportunity to get him to talk or to figure out what he was doing, but you didn't."

"Are you asking me why?"

Damian just looks up at him with his brows furrowed.

This is a conflicting answer.

Peter is most definitely hiding something from them. Bruce has a lot of theories, but his most promising one: Tony and Peter did move to Gotham, but through shady means. Tony didn't leave Peter by choice, was most likely captured by a rogue. Possibly Two-Face, because Firefly wouldn't take a hostage and would rather blow something up. Or Tony was involved with Penguin, maybe Black Mask. Peter is left on his own during that time.

Or another theory: Peter is being held leverage over Tony, and this is the man's way of protecting him.

But there's also a good chance that Tony is abusive, and had left Peter. Seeing as Peter has no records that they can find, he might have been involved in human trafficking, and now Peter is on his own. But that doesn't explain why Peter was so attached to Tony, convinced the man is coming back for him.

Peter does sort of match the description of an abandoned child. Mistrusting of other adults, neglected, malnourished, defensive.

But these are no doubt theories that the others have formed as well, if Bruce taught them right. And he did, as best as he could.

Meeting Peter... Bruce had not been on the case because there were more time-sensitive cases to attend to. Having rogues out and ready to strike at any moment required his full attention. He just so happened to meet Peter while staking out that bar that Harvey frequents.

Bruce might dislike the adoption jokes because they hold a huge amount of truth in them.

He took one look at this reckless, snarky child, who was exceedingly calm in the face of danger, and thought: *This is all too familiar*. Because there is something in the universe that has made a circle in time around him, always bringing him the same story over and over.

Besides that, Peter reminded him so much of Dick that it felt like a slap in the face. Not just because of the tan skin and the dimples, nor the eyes that resemble Dick's mother's, but his attitude. Bruce almost wondered if he'd stepped through time as was looking at his first son as a teenager. He almost *did* decide to take Peter back to the Batcave, like Peter kept joking about.

"If I had taken Peter back with me, what would you expect from that?"

"Interrogating him and finding out what he's been hiding."

"Robin, he wouldn't have told us a thing," Bruce tells him. "He would have been defensive and refused to answer our questions. He was *already* mistrusting of me. When I took him back to where he's been staying, he relaxed so visibly that I knew he had already thought that I would interrogate him."

"But if he *does* want his foster father back, why wouldn't he tell us everything that he knows? He has to be involved in something, he has a secret that could cause more trouble for us." Damian's words only prove to Bruce that he was right, that his other kids had assumed something either happened to Tony or Tony left him. "If you all continue to coddle him and he turns out to be a threat-"

"Then he turns out to be a threat." Bruce interrupts. Damian falls silent, save for the click of his tongue in annoyance of being interrupted, "*Tt*", but Bruce can see he's bottling up a lot of what he wants to say. "There are some cases where giving the benefit of the doubt means more than we know."

If he hadn't been so hung up on his paranoia in the first place, Jason wouldn't have thought that Bruce was going to discard him, and even if he had left for Ethiopia, he may have brought Bruce with him.

He hadn't given Dick the benefit of the doubt, nor Tim, not Steph... He's trying to be better. And something about Peter- something about how that child looks like a copy paste of his son- tells Bruce that he won't regret going against his every instinct. Not this time.

Damian is unsatisfied with that answer, but he's at least thinking about it. Maybe one day, he'll understand. For now, they settle their eyes on an incoming boat. The lights on one side

are off, casting one side in shadow, and the other in light.

-

"Another sighting was reported." Babs chimes in his ear.

Tim is going fucking crazy.

Here's the thing: Tim oh-so-prides himself on his patience. But this Spiderjerk that everyone keeps talking about? Gotham, give him strength not to strangle the guy when they finally meet up.

Tim thought that this case wouldn't take so long- would be done in a couple hours, tops. This isn't the first time someone got it in their heads that they would try to be like the Bats and Robins, wanting to do good. Or, just punch shit. Or kill, thinking that they're doing the right thing. Jason only gets away with killing because B can't handle losing him again, and even then... Yeah.

They get it a lot. Hell, that's how they got *Duke*. He was not only the leader of the We Are Robin movement, he was doing his own vigilante work for a *while* before Bruce was finally able to grab him by the scruff and bring him home.

However, none of those people were like this.

Turns out, that reckless driving case? According to the witnesses (seven drunk teens), Spiderman picked up the car with one hand and moved it away from the light pole. He then proceeded to explain everything that was broken with the car, asked someone in the apartments for bottled water, and lectured the teens on the dangers of drunk driving. He left the sticky note with the most sober of them, and then fucked off to go stop a mugging. There, he left another sticky note.

And then it just keeps fucking going, except this dude is *everywhere*.

It wasn't just the Upper East Side- he gave a Metropolis transport directions to a clinic. He stopped a bike theft in Robinson Park, he helped EMS in the University District transport patients that got into a boating accident- that's on the *other side of the fucking island!* Babs just keeps coming in with more reports, more sightings, more stupid fucking sticky notes!

"Someone in Coventry just tweeted that a guy named Spiderman helped him find his dog and gave him a sticky note doodle-"

"Are you serious?" Tim should not be this pressed, but there is. No rhyme or reason to where this dude shows up, and Tim has been chasing his tail since 11PM. It's nearing 2AM now, he should be heading back to the Manor to crash.

"He's good, whoever he is. And his doodles get better throughout the night." Babs has the nerve to sound impressed. *"He draws dogs with two circles, four stick legs and a stick tail, and a smiley face."*

"I don't care how he draws his dogs!"

"You should." She snickers in his ear. *"Oh, hey. Wow, you're gonna hate this. Someone in the City Hall District just reported that a guy named Spiderman stopped a car from running into the G. Superior Courthouse."*

Tim closes his eyes. Takes a deep breath.

"You mean he's somehow gotten from Coventry, past Robinson Park, the bridges, the Diamond District, Old Gotham, and made his way near the docks. On the *other side of the city*? All in what, less than twenty minutes?"

"Have we ruled out teleportation?"

"He *has* to have teleportation!" Tim shouts running a harried hand through his hair. "How else is he getting places so fast?"

"So, this guy is clearly a meta in some way, if he has the strength to lift a car with one hand."

"Keep in mind that they were drunk and no one else reported super strength."

"Hey, weird."

"What is it?" Tim turns on his heel to start grappling towards City Hall District. He's pushing it time wise, but anyone who lectures him about taking his time to get home can take the case from him and *they* can find this Elusive Spiderman instead. Because Tim is going to lose his patience.

"Some witnesses described Spiderman as short, and a lot of people thought he was a new Robin." Babs explains, and Tim clicks his tongue. Bruce *and* Jason aren't going to like that. *"But the witnesses at City Hall all describe this Spiderman as being an adult."*

"Guess I'll have to look into *that* too." Tim grapples past Robinson Park. He's about to make it towards the bridge when Babs hums in his ear.

"...Hey, double-R."

"Please don't tell me what I think you're about to tell me."

"He was just sighted in the Upper West Side."

Tim's eye twitches under his mask.

When he had said earlier that he felt that something was off, he'd been desperate not to be right. He's got a lot on his plate right now- he *should* be at home, studying for midterms so he can get this stupid GED that everyone says is sooo important.

(He *should* be in the Batcave, trying to find any sort of online trail for Peter, because seriously, *where did that kid come from?* Is he connected to a human trafficking case? Are there more kids out there that they *don't* know about? Is this Tony guy someone they need to take down? Why does *Tony* not have anything on him? Is that even his real name?)

But instead, he's chasing after this Spiderman guy, because Hell opened up. Maybe the 'Can't Say It Out Loud' rule should be changed to 'Don't Even Think It.'

-

Peter is having a lot of fun.

Once he got back into the swing of things, it was like he hadn't missed a day. He's gotten to meet a lot of people, and apparently, Gotham is more trusting of someone who might be a Robin than they are trusting of a random 14 year old, so maybe that's another point for how trustworthy the Bats are. Cause if their people trust them like that, then they've got to be doing something right.

He's been doing this for so long that he almost forgets why he went out in the first place: to find the guy that grabbed Peter and brought him here. It's as he makes his way closer to Diamond District that Peter's senses go off and he's reminded of what he's there for.

RIGHT THERE RIGHT THERE!

Peter flips when he reaches the arc of a swing, peering below at the assortment of rooftops. The Jumping Radar is shouting out at him, letting him know that it senses a disturbance of air nearby. Peter pin points the location on his map, and is thankful to find that it's not inside of a building, but on top of one.

A white light flashes at the top of a building, startling Peter as he remembers the sensation of teleporting like that. He ignores the memory in favor of stopping his webbing mid swing and thwipping out another to head in that direction with a grunt.

He swerves over the top of that building in an arch, landing on the roof with silent feet. He drops down to his hand to keep his balance, scanning the roof with wide eyes.

near see it? right there! bad bad bad

His heart pounds as he spots the figure of the man, running away from where he appeared and hunched over himself.

This is it. This is what Peter has been waiting for, has been prepping for this entire time. He should be excited, but all he can really feel is anticipation and the overwhelming urge to get sick. He really hates that getting nervous makes his tummy hurt.

The man is scrambling to get down to the fire escape on the side of the building, chattering loudly to himself and clutching onto a metal briefcase. His giggles sound almost demented, or like they slip not from laughter or joy, but from a broken piece of him.

Peter tilts his head, eyeing the man as he crawls flat on the roof, hidden inside the shadows.

His hands movements are odd- snappy one second, but then fluid the next. When he laughs, his head twitches towards the left. His spider-senses hum with low *danger danger danger...*

no close don't bad idea

But how else is he gonna get that wrist tech?

“I got it, I did! I did excellent!” The man’s voice rings in Peter’s ears. He might not have been able to hear what was being shouted at him when they were falling, but he does recall that the man’s voice and made a shiver run down his spine *before* he had kidnapped Peter.

No time to be scared, Parker.

Spider-Man stands on his feet, watching as the man struggles to hold his suit case and get down the fire escape. He cocks his head to one side, wondering how the hell this fool managed to one up him in the first place.

“I’d bet good money that whatever is in that briefcase doesn’t belong to you.” Spider-Man’s voice has the man spin around, one foot slipping on the fire escape with a *clang!* He catches himself with one bony hand, wildly pointing at Spider-Man with the other.

“SSSpider-Man!?”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” Spider-Man stalks closer. He was right, the briefcase has a large, shiny logo for Wayne Enterprises on the side. He’s disappointed with himself that he hadn’t gotten here in time to prevent the briefcase from getting stolen. Does he have tech, or something else inside there?

“Give me that wrist-piece.”

“Never!” The man howls like Spider-Man had suggested cutting off his arm, holding his wrist tight in his other hand and shaking himself. “Never! *Never!* It’s mine, you can’t have it! Go away! Get back!”

“And I’m supposed to just *listen* to you?” Spider-Man scoffs at him. The idiot sounds like a petulant child. “And what’s in this?” Spider-Man growls, thwipping a web at the briefcase. He expects it to release from the man’s hand no problem, but it doesn’t budge.

They stare at each other, and Spider-Man takes a moment to remember who he’s dealing with here. No normal human can hold onto something that tightly, not with Peter’s and the webbing’s strength.

“You’re enhanced?”

“Mutant,” The man corrects, electric yellow eyes blinking one at a time. A wicked grin spreads across his lips, revealing a row of teeth with hooks at his canines. Fangs, but they’re covered enough that he can’t tell what type they are. “And *a genius*. I created the ability to travel dimensions!”

“I don’t understand. Instead of showing the world what you did and getting the credit that way, you start trying to steal from Stark Industries and now the Wayne Enterprise?” Spider-Man shakes his head.

The disappointment eats at him- all of this wouldn’t have happened if the man had half of common sense to go along with the intelligence he has. He could have had something

revolutionary, but whatever is broken in his brain prevented him from understanding that. Spider-Man tugs the briefcase, but the man's hold grows stronger.

"Why did you attack Peter?"

Because the least he can do is bother to give some clarity to the situation. He hates being out of the loop.

"The boy is leverage!" The man squals, tugging the briefcase back to his chest and attempting to get away. He kicks at the webbing in a futile attempt, then tries biting it only for it to stick to his mouth for a moment. He spits it out and rubs it off on his shoulder, growling under his breath. "I *need* that tech! I won't stand for a company stealing my ideas!"

"Stealing!?" Spider-Man grits his teeth. "You *kidnapped* someone!"

"I do what is necessary!" He retorts, as if it made all the sense in the world.

"Why bring him here? To this place? Why not just keep him in the original world?"

Because that makes no sense either- Peter could be leverage in his own universe. Unless-

"No one else can get him back, like this." The man laughs, a wheezy thing. "They could find him if we left him in that universe. No, no *here*, we have the power over them *and* the boy."

Except the moron hasn't even questioned what Spider-Man is doing in this universe. Some *genius* he is, not knowing who he's talking to, or why. Is he seriously not even going to ask? He was only a *little* surprised that Spider-Man showed up to stop him?

"A boy that you have no idea where he is?"

"That-!" The man scowls fiercely at the reminder. "That was a mistake!"

What?

"What do you mean?"

"Lost the boy." The man hisses, narrowing his eyes and glaring at Spider-Man. "Was supposed to keep him, but I hadn't tested travel with two. He slipped, fell. I found a crater but no boy."

His heart thuds louder, blood rushing in his ears.

He was... This man was trying to keep Peter?

Alright, he knows that it made no sense to just let Peter loose on Gotham, but Peter hadn't even thought about it. He had supposed that this guy was crazy enough that he wouldn't think that far ahead. But actually, Peter was *supposed* to stay captured...

Oh, god. Because Peter is *leverage*.

They had no proof of life to send back home, to show that Peter wasn't dead, or dying. No doubt that threw a wrench in this guy's plans, but Peter is thankful.

Not because he now thinks that his family might *definitely* assume he is dead and gone, or they're holding out hope that Peter is fine and they're bluffing. That sucks. But to think that if things had gone *right* for this guy, Peter wouldn't be out in Gotham, having access to vigilantes that check on him, and the man would have figured out that Peter is Spider-Man, or he would have *hurt* Peter in an effort to show Tony that he means business? And Peter would have been *really* reliving his worst memories of the last time he was kidnapped, and-

"Who are you?"

The man's smile reminds Peter of a serpent, and he has to resist the urge to take a step back. His entire body rushes cold, his neck buzzing as his spider sense whispers in his ear.

danger back away leave go bad danger no no no

"I am Dr. Jonathan Ohnn." He answers.

Ohnn... Ohnn... for some reason, the name strikes Peter as familiar, like he's heard it before. But he doesn't have the time to think of it now, he needs to get that wrist tech and the briefcase away from this guy before he uses it to do something drastic- and Peter would like to get home.

Spider-Man tugs harshly at the case. It doesn't budge from his hand, but Ohnn stumbles forward. Anger flashes in the man's eyes, and with a fierce snarl, he snatches it back- Peter's eyes widen as he sees the flash indicating a jump and he jumps forward to grab onto Ohnn's arm. "You're not going anywh-

His voice is drowned out by the feeling of a jump, just as unpleasant as he remembers. When they pop out on the other side, it's in the air above the alley. Wind whips around them as Peter struggles to grab the band, and Ohnn screeches in rage.

The case is raised up in his fit of violence and Peter takes a blow to the face, the metal crunching his nose. He blinks past the pain and keeps his hold strong as Ohnn jumps again, this time near the ground. They both go tumbling, rolling onto the street in a fury of fists and kicks.

Actually- it looks all too childish, if he takes the split second to view this from an outside perspective. If a childish game of slapping and kicking also involves slamming a briefcase down on someone's head in multiple repeated blows.

"Give it to me!"

"Die, you insect!" Ohnn screams back. The next hit is with Ohnn's bare fist- the briefcase falling to the ground- and hurts, somehow, *more* than the first hit with the briefcase. Peter's grip slips on the wrist, but he *squeezes* with more force and sticks to the metal.

Ohnn screams in pain, and there's the crunch of metal underneath Peter's grip. He tugs Ohnn's sleeve up and attempts to peel back the wrist piece off of Ohnn's arm, but Ohnn manages to wiggle out of Peter's grip.

He kicks up at Peter, hitting his stomach. Peter grunts in pain, but closes his fists around Ohnn's ankle, turns on his heel in a circular motion, and starts to swing Ohnn around like he's a bat. Ohnn screams when Peter lets go of him, sending the man into a nearby car. The windows bust and glass shatters onto the pavement and inside the car. The alarms screech in protest, and lights go out in the apartments around them one by one.

People are scrambling to get inside, some of them barely taking the time to glance over their shoulders to see what is going on. Peter grits his teeth, dropping into a running stance as Ohnn gets back onto his feet.

Ohnn jumps before Peter can get to him. He appears behind Peter in a flash, *laughs* in Peter's face as he grabs the briefcase, and jumps just before the webbing can hit his face-disappearing into ash.

Peter's left alone as the street plunges into complete darkness. Dead silence hangs over them all, the hum of electricity disappearing and leaving only anticipation in its wake. Gotham holds her breath, and through the darkness, it feels as though someone's eyes have fallen on him.

The power flickers back to life moments later, save for the light pole above him.

Chapter End Notes

hehehe <3

So! Peter finally goes out as Spider-Man (it's been 10 days, he's so dramatic) and causes both chaos and community! Keep in mind that Peter does NOT want to be a Robin, and at the moment, he doesn't want to work with the Bats, he's just using their name so the trust issues of Gotham don't cause trouble for him.

Also, if anyone is wondering: Yes, Jonathan Ohnn IS a canonical Spider-Man villain. However, canon is my bitch, and I've twisted around the story just a weeeee little bit :) If anyone's curious, this is where you can find my notes on him: [Jonathan Ohnn Wiki](#)

Thank you for reading! I'll try to answer questions in the comments as usual.

i've been dreaming about flying for a long time

Chapter Summary

“Like, this Batburger could be a restaurant based around some guy called Antman instead. AntBurger doesn’t sound as cool, if I’m being honest.”

“I’d love to meet a guy called Antman, are you joking? What would his powers be?”
Tim uses to fry as antennae, making his voice higher pitched and nasally. “I’m Antman, surrender or be brought to justice!”

Chapter Notes

Hi Hi Hi!! I'm back from vacation <3 Fun fact: I didn't have internet there and I use Reedsy to write, so I handwrote not this chapter, but some stuff for chapter 6, in the Notebook that I use for this fic.

As always, thanks for all of the love on this fic! Ry and I sure had a lot of fun reading the comments last chapter, and I just KNOW y'all are gonna freak out with some of the stuff that's in this chapter <333 That being said, here are some warnings before we go into it:

TW for anxiety attacks, self deprecation, and general talks of violence and abuse, as always. Make sure you're in the right headspace before reading!

Word Count, for those who like to know: 22,628

Ik, it's really long!! forgive me, those who hate longer chapters. I am insane and just a silly little guy. Also, I didn't know how to split this without it being weird with other chapters, so here we are.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Anger doesn’t even begin to cover what Peter felt at first.

Realizing that all he is to Ohnn is *leverage* so he can get Stark Tech? That had hit him hard, the frustration eating away at him as he got away from the street. He’s a *liability* to Tony now, and he knows it. Knew it. He had known the whole time, practically, but to hear it outright had pissed him off.

His first thought? It was: *what if it happens again?* After all of this is over, what if Peter is targeted again and he doesn’t stop it? And then Tony has to worry all over again? They had

discussions about this very thing when Tony became his foster parent. His social worker had mentioned it so many times, and Tony had assured her that he had the best security in the world. And now, Peter's gone and made Tony a liar.

If Peter manages to get back, there's no guarantee that Tony gets to keep him.

No, Peter. Tony would never let them take you away.

But he might, if he thinks Peter is in more danger there.

He would never- he promised, remember?

That promise. Peter clutches at it, wishes he could hold the words in his hand. He thinks if he could hold a promise, he'd never be able to doubt that it's real.

When Peter had been kidnapped the first time, Tony had nearly *died* just so he could save Peter, and in doing so, he'd earned a trust that Peter thought he'd never be able to give *anyone* ever again.

Maybe it had something to do with meeting Tony before the kidnapping. Peter had, after all, stumbled into multiple Avengers that were looking for the people who were taking kids in Queens. Targeting the homeless ones most of all- Kids like Peter. They all had been investigating the deaths and disappearances of those kids that were dumped unceremoniously into rivers and unmarked graves, left to rot in morgues.

From what Peter heard, those kids either got reunited with their family in death, or had no one show up at all. It was only because of the Avengers that they got to keep their names in death and weren't labeled as Jane or John Does.

Peter, who went by Parker at the time, was a pretty well known figure in the community. He had been a valuable resource to the Avengers because Peter could tell them the names of kids who went missing that no one reported because there was no one *to* report. And that had led to Peter going to Stark Tower more often than not. Which meant that when Peter went missing, he had been able to *call* Tony first hand, and they knew his last known location.

He was found because of them. He was held for three days. He was... experimented on.

We don't want to think about it.

The point being, Tony had been the one to find him, he'd been the one to get Peter out of there. And he was there afterwards too. He was the one who promised that he'd never let anyone hurt Peter again, and that he'd make sure that Peter would stay with him. No one else.

He had put in the effort, and sure, it wasn't, like, the *best* way he could have handled it. Tony's not known for his emotional competence. Tony is a man of theatrics and many talents, but he's never really been graceful about that kind of stuff.

Still, however lacking in emotional grace that Tony could be, he had made a *promise*, and Peter fully believed he could keep it. He clung to Tony, to Pepper and Happy, and the life that

Tony promised him. Even if Tony doesn't see him as a *son*, Peter has a family. One that takes care of him, that looks out for him.

He trusts Tony. He does. He won't listen to that voice in his head that tries to sabotage that, because it would be unfair to Tony. It would be saying that Tony is a liar, when he's proven himself over this last year that he wouldn't betray Peter. *Ever*.

The second thing that hit him after that fiasco of a fight was overwhelming disappointment.

He's so *stupid*. He shouldn't have let go of Ohnn, that's how that slippery bitch was able to get away. He should have held on, and he would have gotten that *damn* wrist tech without a problem. But because he did something rash- because he was angry- Ohnn got away.

Again.

See? This is why he sticks to the small time stuff, like a normal 14 year old should. Who is he helping when he gets involved in the big fights? Not himself, not Tony. Not anyone. He just- He gets in the way.

Maybe he's not cut out to be an Avenger. None of his mentors would have done something that stupid and foolish. All of their training feels wasted on him, this pathetic kid who can't get *one* thing right. Some student he is, forgetting everything they taught him the second the real world comes around to *literally* hit him in the face.

...But that's also not allowed. Peter knows Natasha would flick him on the forehead if she saw him like this (she always just somehow knows when he is "moping" as she calls it). Dr. Banner would go through a list of dumb things they've all done in their time as heroes. Tony would start singing over him if Peter started to imply anything about himself being stupid. And Pepper would encourage him to move forward despite the mistakes.

The third emotion to hit him?

A stupid, aching, horrible loneliness.

All of his friends- no, his *family*, are in another universe, being taunted by some *asshole* who has Peter trapped here. He just wishes he had at least *someone* else from his universe here to talk to. Something that made some damn sense, you know?

Tony would have something clever to annoy him with, Pepper would talk him through what he's feeling. Ned...

Ned just *being* here would be a comfort like no other. He'd probably tell Peter something silly like how "cool" he was when fighting Ohnn, and in turn, Peter could pretend he believed it. He'd get to rest his head on Ned's shoulder, listen to his heartbeat, and feel comforted by his presence. And his ramblings.

He feels like a stupid kid right now.

~~He is a stupid kid. He can't do anything right.~~

Peter snuffles, wiping away the blood on his nose with his jacket sleeve. It stains red and all he can think about it is that it sucks his one good jacket is getting blood on it. That was one of the few things he had going for him: no blood on his clothes.

He leans against the wall behind him for support, one arm hugging his knees close to his chest. He's sitting on a rooftop in the Upper East End, close to Benny's. He had snuck back in and changed back into his civilian outfit once he realized Ohnn wasn't coming back tonight, and now he finds himself sitting on a random building and nursing his wounded pride.

Peter should go back to Benny's. It's the smart thing to do. Logical, to get some sleep, at least. Maybe cry into his pillow and let off some steam. He's tired and he wants to sleep.

But also... he's always found he's able to think better when he's on a roof somewhere, looking at the city. Even if it's not home right now. There's something about the bright lights blinking up at him that reminds him how small everything actually is.

'Kid, don't get so down. You did really well.' He can hear Tony saying. *'Of course, 'well' was you getting your ass kicked, but what can you do?'*

He laughs smally, tugging his sleeves down to cover his cold hands. Tony would know what to say to cheer him up. FRIDAY would play a song in the background as they worked in the lab, but would fuss at them that they're up way past Peter's bedtime (though he swears he's old enough to not have one) and make them go to bed eventually.

Tony won't be mad at him for taking so long. It's not like Ohnn was easy to track down. He just appears randomly- or, not randomly. He appears in places that Peter doesn't have a sense to, yet. *Next time*. He tells himself. *Next time, Ohnn is going down*.

He snuffles again. His pride might be getting better, but his face *really* hurts. Ohnn is stronger than he looks, and Peter believes he wasn't holding back. ...That doesn't bode well for him when they fight again. Peter will have to use more strength next time, and try not to get so angry. But as much training as Peter has had in the last year, he still finds it hard to hold back his strength if he starts getting too into a fight.

He should write down his breathing exercises that his therapist has him trying out. Maybe then he won't lose his cool when fighting Ohnn. Peter scoffs to himself, wincing when the action hurts his face. There's that familiar burning itch as his nose locks back into place with a crunch, no longer broken, but definitely sporting a fat, purple bruise.

close, near, behind? no: left

Peter tenses up as a shadow moves to his left, his stomach sinking in fear.

hello!!!

But it isn't danger. He relaxes just a little when he spots a familiar vigilante stalking over to where Peter's little perch is. Literally stalking, because he knows Red Hood is supposed to be

in Crime Alley. And yet here he is walking towards Peter as if they're old friends that planned to meet up on purpose.

Punk ass Bats, always checking to make sure he's alive and on his well being. They're awful awful jerks, he tells you.

(It's nice. Feels like if he ends up going missing, someone will find him again.)

"Hey, Mister Red Hood." Peter mumbles, looking back out at the city. Dread fills him and he freezes, biting his bottom lip as a wave of anxiety washes over him.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

He *knows* just how bad his face looks right now, and he knows what conversation is about to happen. Nightwing had freaked over the last bruises, and snitched on him to all the other Bats because he's a snitch bitch. He had only managed to get out of that because of timing and avoiding answering.

He just wishes that Red Hood had caught him at a better time. If he had come later, the bruises wouldn't be so bad. They'd look almost healed... (maybe. Peter isn't getting enough to eat lately even with Benny's meals, so the healing might take longer.)

And yeah, it honestly looks worse to him than the other time. His nose got the worst of it, and at least it isn't broken anymore, but his right eye is sort of swollen shut and his lip is busted.

This... isn't gonna help his case in the slightest.

Peter ducks his head away as if that will help him at all. It's an attempted to at least stall what he knows is coming long enough that he can come up with something to say as an excuse. *No, my Dad doesn't hit me, I just live in Gotham at the moment and I got beat up.* That sounds good. Peter is so smart.

Red Hood waves at him, offering a tired, "*Hey*", but stops mid step when he gets close enough to see Peter in the light. His boot hovers in the air and then gently lowers, and his fingers twitch into a fist.

Yep. Exactly what Peter expected.

Peter doesn't look at him.

"Who did that to you?" Red Hood's voice is calm- too calm. Peter's senses hiss in his ear *angry, he's angry*. But Peter doesn't think he's angry at him.

Peter shrugs as Red Hood sits down next to him. The man is unnaturally warm, so his suit must have a heating system in place underneath. Peter resists the urge to get closer to the heat- his thermoregulation issue had his teeth chattering, even if the big jacket he wears provides some comfort.

“Some older kids.” Peter lies. “Didn’t know ‘em. They just wanted money.”

“Where?”

“A few blocks over.” Peter lies again, and he can feel Aunt May’s disappointment in him. “They’re gone by now.”

“It looks pretty bad.”

“I’ve had worse.” He says, before he can think about how it might sound.

Red Hood is silent, and Peter finally chances a glance at him. His fist is clenching and unclenching, a bloody battle waging in his mind. His heartbeat picks up, and Peter hears him taking a few deep breaths, recognizing the four-three-four pattern from his own therapist’s breathing exercises.

“Is your Dad home?”

Peter scowls even though it hurts his face, his voice tinged in defense. “Why?”

Red Hood doesn’t care that Peter got angry. He cuts through like a bull, forcing Peter to listen. “Because you’re hurt, and you aren’t at home telling him.”

Ugh, he hates to say it, but the Maybe Bat Maybe Rogue has got him on that one. He can’t say anything to that. *Obviously*. Peter wipes his nose again, pointedly turning away from him to stare at the city lights. “He’ll be back soon.”

“Liar.”

Peter stiffens, indignant fire spiking in him. “Am *not*.”

“Are too.”

He huffs in frustration, looking away from Red Hood again, scrambling to collect his thoughts much the way someone would struggle to catch a bubble. Peter doesn’t have to say anything else- no rebuttal, no excuses, nothing to defend Tony. Because as much as Peter wants to defend him, he can’t do that fully without admitting *why* Tony isn’t here. He just wants to scream and throw everything out there in a Hail Mary.

But he holds it back. *Be smart, Peter.*

He doesn’t know enough about the Bats. And besides, this is *his* fight. It’s the Avengers, not these heroes. What if they handle their cases somehow in a manner that Peter doesn’t want to get involved in?

~~Being ridiculous.~~

A rough hand falls on his head, ruffling his hair. Peter attempts to get away, but the hand falls still and... Peter does too. Red Hood’s hand is warm, and suddenly the fight is lost on him, at

least for that battle. Red Hood lets his hand stay there, as if waiting for Peter to throw his hand off.

Peter doesn't. He can't find it in him to let go of the contact- *any* human contact, because it's been nearly two weeks, and he misses Tony, and his mentors, and Ned, *so* badly right now. And his chest aches a little bit of having someone this close, someone to tease him, even if they aren't real friends.

That must be a green light in Red Hood's eyes, because he speaks again when he knows Peter has relaxed just a little. "What's your name?"

Peter blinks at Red Hood, the question staring at him in the face. What is he talking about? Don't they-

OH. No, they *don't*.

He never told any of the vigilantes his name. In all the meetings he's had with them up until this point, he hadn't introduced himself properly. Isn't it silly? He had an emotional freak-out before he told them his name.

Unless they *do* already know it, and are just keeping that a secret from him.

The thing is though, Peter doesn't want to fully introduce himself, which is surely what Red Hood and the Bats are looking for. If they hadn't already searched Peter up, they'd want to know. But Peter doesn't know if "*Peter Benjamin John Andrea Parker*" lives in this universe or not, and he's worried about giving out "*Peter Parker*" and finding out if he's googleable or not.

So, for the just in case, Peter ain't giving them anything but his first name.

"Peter." He supplies, looking curiously up at Red Hood as if that would tell him if Red Hood did know it and was just pretending not to. It would be suspicious of them if they said Peter's name and he had realized they shouldn't know it...

Damn, they have Peter read pretty well. Bastards. All of them.

"You hungry, Pete?"

Peter narrows his eyes in suspicion- and at the nickname calling. He can't tell what emotion Red Hood has on his face because of the helmet. The man waits for a reply patiently, seemingly understanding what Peter would be hesitant about. Going to get food with a stranger that has at least five guns on him (and two hidden somewhere, Peter can hear the metal in his jacket and boot) and is probably a crime lord doesn't sound like something a kid with a reasonable sense of self awareness and self preservation instincts should have.

But Peter can't sense danger from him, at least, not any danger *towards* Peter. There's a buzzing underneath all of the *hellos!* and *safes!* that his spider—sense supplies to him. It feels... green.

Green?

Hm. Peter doesn't know what to do with that. Sometimes he feels colors from people. Like Miss Wanda has always been red, a scarlet that spreads. And the Hulk is green too, but Red Hood's green feels separate from him.

So, there's the buzzing that says this man could kill and has killed. But there's nada, zilch, nothing of an immediate danger danger towards Peter. All he can sense is his own hungry stomach, and his backpack is sitting next to him with money for food.

His face needs food to get fixed, he reasons. He's not getting too close to a strange vigilante. He's just getting food, for his health.

"I know a place nearby." Red Hood takes his non-protest as an answer and stands up, stretching his back. "Let's get somethin' to eat. I'm starvin'."

He takes the risk grabbing Red Hood's outstretched hand and letting himself get tugged up onto his feet. He snatches his bag close to his chest then slings it over one shoulder. Red Hood keeps one arm around Peter's shoulders to keep him from going over the side- a gesture that is still nice even though Peter has excellent balance.

"You're not gonna kidnap me, right?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Uh, *yeah*, I'm pretty sure that I'm not gonna kidnap ya."

"Cool."

Red Hood pauses and says, "'Cool'? That was too easy. Ya know people can just *say* they won't kidnap ya? Right? You know that, right?"

Peter's heart drops and he gawks at Red Hood. "You're gonna kidnap me!? But you just said-"

"No, no I'm not! I'm just *saying* that ya can't reply with 'Cool' if anyone other than me says that!" Red Hood slaps his forehead.

"Like Nightwing?"

"No, like a stranger!"

"You... *are* a stranger." Peter is growing more confused by the second.

"Ya know me, Peter."

"No, I don't actually, 'cause otherwise I'd like, *know* your name. Unless you're *always* Red Hood and don't exist in the daytime. Like a vampire."

“Okay, *first* of all.” Red Hood goes to cover his mouth, but settles on pointing at Peter. “If ya mean that vampires *stop* existing when the sun comes out, they don’t. They just turn to ash if they see the sun, and they sleep during the day.”

“But what about Twilight? Edward sparkles.”

“Second of all,” Red Hood ignores him. “Ya know that I’m a good guy, and I won’t kidnap ya. Ya don’t *need* my name to know that.”

“No, I don’t.” What Peter knows is that his spider-sense likes them.

“Yes you do. I’m a good guy, and I won’t. I’m the least likely of us to kidnap ya.”

“*Least* likely?” Peter is starting to wonder if his spider-sense got all mucked up during the multidimensional travel. “Who’s the *most*?”

“Batman. He’s done it before, and he won’t stop.”

“Did he kidnap *you*?”

“Yeah, it’s a real problem.” Red Hood’s reply leaves a low hum from his spider-sense, and the topic sounds like dangerous territory.

“They have therapy for that.” Peter says. “Also, he didn’t kidnap *me* when he drove me in the Batmobile. Had plenty of opportunity then, if it’s really that big of a problem.”

“He did what?”

“I got to sit in the Batmobile.” Peter blabs, unknowing of why Red Hood sounds so affronted. “I wanted to press the buttons, but I figured I pressed enough of his to know I shouldn’t test my luck. I *really* wanted to, though.”

“He let *you* sit in the front seat?”

“Why would I sit in the back?” Peter crosses his arms. “It was just us. I would have felt like I was taking the world’s strangest Uber back to Benny’s.”

“Ugh, just, whatever. My point is: unless it’s me, don’t just say ‘cool’ when someone says they won’t kidnap you.”

“Cool.”

Red Hood stares at Peter.

“I mean... alright?”

“Let’s just fuckin’ go.”

-

They get down the same way that they got up a building last time they talked. Red Hood is gentle with Peter but keeps a strong hand, as if he's scared the wind would blow Peter away. And when Peter tried to pay for his own food, Red Hood actually *slapped* his hand down and made him put his money clip in his backpack.

The place that Red Hood offered to eat at ended up being a taco stand that, if Peter's nose was correct, had more guns than it did spices. But Peter takes that as a symbol of a long-standing business in Gotham, because he's seen no other taco stands, and everyone here ignores each other.

"It's like a watering hole." Peter mutters to himself as he sits down at a bench.

"It's like a what?"

"Dinosaurs wouldn't kill each other at watering holes. Essential resource became a safe haven." He babbles to the vigilante that sits across from him, who's dumping their food into the middle of the picnic bench. "Tacos are essential resources, I guess."

"Yeah, yeah, ok. Eat your food, Squirt." Peter thinks Red Hood might have rolled his eyes under that helmet.

Peter takes one last look at where their picnic table is positioned. It's just outside of the light, farther back from the other people here who are minding their business. In fact, Peter realizes that because of the bushes on the other side, he's the only one who'd even know Red Hood was sitting here.

"Aren't you gonna eat too?"

Red Hood stares at him, so Peter stares back.

"You said you were hungry." He reminds him. "And these are a lot of tacos."

Indeed, Red Hood had bought them more than what Peter should have been able to eat alone, if he were fully human. If he didn't know any better, he'd assume that Red Hood knew how much he needs to eat. The amount of tacos on the table would be enough for Peter to be satisfied for two meals. But certainly, Peter isn't going to eat *that* much. Not only would it blow his cover, he'd also look a little desperate and weird.

And yet, Red Hood doesn't move to grab anything on the table.

Peter huffs, and he turns around on the picnic bench to face away from him. "I'll even close my eyes, cause I'm so nice. See? Well, you can't see, because my back is turned. But my eyes are closed. Scout's honor."

After a few seconds, Peter grins when he hears a chuckle from under the mask and then the click as if something was removed. Without the voice modulator, Red Hood's voice doesn't sound that different, just less muffled.

"All right. I trust you."

Trust him, huh? Peter doesn't know why. It's not like he did anything to deserve that kind of trust. All he's done is lose his temper and lie to them.

"Hand me a taco, please." Peter holds out his hand behind him, and Red Hood sets one in his palm.

Peter unfolds the taco, wondering what to even talk about with this guy. Is this a talking situation? Or are they just gonna sit here in silence and bond somehow? He can see Red Hood doing that. It seems like something someone this cool would do.

'Cause even if Peter hadn't admitted it at first, he *does* think Red Hood is pretty cool. Now that he isn't full of adrenaline or having an emotional freak-out or whatever, he can say that Red Hood is objectively, a cool dude. He wears a leather jacket, of course he's cool.

What do people even talk about when they're cool?

"You're from New York, right?" Red Hood breaks the silence just as Peter bites into his food. Peter nods, and Red Hood grunts. "Which part?"

"Queens."

"You like it there?"

"Very much." Peter almost forgot to reply because the taco is that damn good. He can see why this place is watering-hole quality. "My parents moved there before I was born. I'm assuming you're from Gotham?"

"Crime Alley." The man hums in thought. "So why'd you move? If you guys liked it there so much."

Peter shrugs, wondering how exactly to say this. "We didn't have a lot of choice."

And, thus, an idea strikes him with all the grace of a missile launch landing on his front doorstep.

He told Red Hood that if he was really in trouble, he'd tell someone. But Peter can't do that without revealing himself, not with his 'situation'. He'd have to tell them about the alternate universe, about being a 'meta', all of it, and risk getting rejected.

Or maybe he can.

Because if he's being honest, and it isn't hard to be so when it's his inner monologue, Peter would really, *really* like not being kidnapped. For a third time. Or, at least, he'd like having someone be *aware* that it could happen. He'll have to be ten times more careful not to let them figure out that he's Spider-Man and all the other stuff, but this is a step in the right direction.

"...I think we're in trouble." Peter says slowly, and he feels eyes glued on the back of his head almost instantly. "I know I told you I'd tell someone if I was. So I'm telling you, cause I keep promises. And I don't know if Dad can handle this one."

Peter winces at the last part. He *does* think Tony could figure it out. But also, it's kind of hard to do that when there's a potential time limit hanging over their heads, and it wouldn't *hurt* to have a few extra eyes on this. If the Bats pass this little test, then maybe Peter can trust them.

"I don't get to know a lot about it, but some guy followed us here, to Gotham. Jonathan Ohnn. I don't know much else about him, other than he's mad at my dad."

"Your dad tell you this?"

"No." Peter shakes his head. "Jonathan did."

Red Hood is silent. He gets serious enough that Peter hears him set his taco down. "This guy *spoke* to you? When? Where? What did he say?"

He's not telling the *full* truth, but... It's enough, right? To get these vigilantes to keep an eye out for Ohnn, to help Peter catch him without Peter having to get too close to them. Natasha would be proud. The lie is at least rooted in truths, that makes him feel a smidge better.

"I met him in the street. He told me that my dad isn't giving him what he wants for some project of his."

"What kind of project?"

"He wants money and parts for some 'jump' thing. A teleporter. He thinks if he tries to get the stuff legally, someone will steal his work. So he's threatening my dad to get what he wants. A real paranoid kind of guy."

Peter eats his taco, looking up at the buildings above and wondering what Red Hood is thinking. It's a weird situation, a vigilante getting information about a potential bad guy while eating at a taco stand with a kid. Or maybe not. Interrogating people is sort of part of the job.

At least this part is easier than talking about himself.

"Threatening your dad, or you?"

"...Both." Peter admits, looking at his food. "Pretty much implied that he wants to keep Tony and me separate, so Tony'll be more inclined to do what he says."

"Does he know where you live?"

"I don't think he does." Peter admits, truthfully this time. "If he did, wouldn't it make a bigger statement to show up there?"

mad tense worry

Red Hood really *is* worried about him, then. So the vigilantes are trustworthy in this way—with him as Peter, but not Spider-Man. Of course they'd be—they help people all the time. He shouldn't have doubted that.

...His trust issues really do get in the way, like, all the time. Peter holds his hand out for another taco, and Red Hood gives him one without a word. Maybe Red Hood thinks he's buying Peter's trust with food, but... really, it's because Peter can tell he's a good guy.

Strangers can scare Peter. They don't scare Spider-Man, because he's a hero, and no one can hurt Spider-Man. But strangers have always hurt Peter, if he trusts too easily. If he tries to get close, if they know what makes him feel weak.

This stranger isn't so bad.

"And your dad is out of town?"

"Yeah." Peter says, and he apologizes to Tony that it sounds so bad. "But not because he wants to be."

Red Hood is quiet again. Peter wishes he'd at least have the decency to think out loud. He can't see his face, can't read his body language, can't even deduce what he's feeling when he speaks. Peter is forced to rely on listening to an ever steady heartbeat- an incredibly healthy sounding heart- and the calming breaths he takes. Forced to rely on his spider-sense, which doesn't tell him more than what his other senses can tell him.

"You're a good kid." Red Hood finally speaks, and it isn't what Peter was expecting. He tilts his head in confusion. Red Hood must understand what that means, because he sighs. "You should try to stay inside, if you can. We'll bring you food and stuff like that-"

"I have what I need. I'm just telling you that you have an angry meta guy roaming around."

"Meta? You didn't mention that."

"He said he was." Peter winces a little, glad that Red Hood can't see his face. "He has yellow eyes and he blinks his eyelids one at a time. Also, he was mad at me, so I didn't ask more about that. That's all I've got."

"Blinks with..." Red Hood huffs. "We'll look for him. We'll find him, and we won't let him hurt you or your dad. Maybe you'll get to move back to Queens when he gets thrown in jail."

Peter grins into his taco, but Red Hood can't see it.

"I'd like that."

-

Jason wasn't hungry after that conversation. The tacos end up getting mostly eaten by the Shortstack in front of him, who's like a bottomless pit for food. His mind races with thoughts, trying to keep up and keep cool as he settles down in a chair. Tim is typing away with the information Jason gave him.

Jonathan Ohnn is an unfamiliar name to him. He doesn't recall any rogues or tagged potentials from Gotham with that name, but if he traveled from New York, then it makes

sense. It pisses him off to even think about what this guy could be like, if he's going after a *kid* in order to get what he wants.

Peter was lying about those bruises, he knew damn well. Ohnn had obviously given them to him, maybe as a warning to Tony that he could do worse. But Peter clearly isn't in contact with Tony right now, so Peter's getting hurt for no damn reason.

(Not that there's any reason at all to hurt a kid. He wants to kill this guy either way.)

What kind of idiot leaves a kid alone in *Gotham*, on *purpose*? What even was the plan? Was he going to drop Peter off, hope he doesn't die, and blends in with the crowd? That's such a shitty idea that Jason can't even fathom someone using it seriously. Peter is 14, he can't be left alone in a regular city, let alone Gotham of all places. And there's no way Tony is his foster dad. CPS is shitty here, but not shitty enough that Peter wouldn't be pulled away for bruises like that. So Tony is a guardian, but in what way?

When Jason gets his hands on both this Ohnn asshole and Tony...

Deep breaths. Don't lose your cool.

He hates that he understands what Peter is feeling. It brings up ugly, ugly memories, and his body feels cold. He rubs at his temples, attempting to push out the thoughts. Being a kid in foster-care, ending up homeless, fighting to survive on his own, a mother that...

Clinging to someone who isn't there for you.

He closes his eyes, but it makes it all feel ten times worse. As if he can see feet walking towards him in a warehouse-

"Jay?"

He opens his eyes, seeing the others in his peripheral vision. Tim has looked up from his computer, watching Jason. Guilt eats at him.

"M fine." He mutters, trying to soothe his rising anger. Sometimes he can't tell what the emotion really is, he just calls it anger. "M just tired."

Tim hums as a reply, but he doesn't have the words to say. None of them ever really do. It makes it worse if they try to pick it apart. Steph, who really should still be sitting in bed while she recovers, gives him a thoughtful and worried smile.

Jason knows he's only better, or... more *stable*, because of his family. The anger is easier to manage nowadays, but still. Sometimes, that green-eyed fury tries to take hold of him, tries to ruin the relationships he built up.

Peter's outbursts of anger felt normal to handle, like he was watching his own self from the outside. The poor kid is riddled with brewing anxiety, guilt, anger, all sorts of emotions that make it hard to breathe. Even more reasons that he shouldn't be alone.

He's so- so- *small*. Had Jason ever been that small? Like, *really*? He knows that at one point in his life, he had looked up at people to see them. But he can't remember *being* that small. He's 14, yeah, and sure, he's short. Damian is 14 and short, but Jason meant, like...

The kid looks like he blends right into the background. He erases his presence so easily, trying so hard not to be seen. It reminds Jason of that ill feeling in his gut when he saw Damian in the Robin suit, as young as he is, that screams: *They shouldn't be in this position*.

It's wrong, and it pisses Jason off. He's sick and tired of kids being involved in a fight that isn't theirs.

He hadn't noticed Dick had entered the room until he sat down next to Jason. Dick leans back in his chair, fresh out of the shower with clean clothes on and a towel over his hair. Jason squints at him, something nagging at the back of his mind that he finds difficulty naming.

Dick raises a brow at him. "What're you looking at me like that for?"

"Your face is pissing me off."

Dick ignores his comment, likely because it had no bite behind it. Jason can't shake the feeling that he's missing something, that it's staring him right in the face and waiting for him to notice.

"Whoa, wait." Tim remarks, backing up from one computer monitor to see the other. "I think I found something on this Ohnn guy... though, the name is for 'Beckham Graham.'"

"Lemme see!" Steph scoots her chair closer, pushing Tim to the side. Ever since Peter showed up in that alley, she's become more interested in him like the rest of them.

"Jay, tell me if this sounds like what Peter was talking about. A few days ago, a man entered Wayne Industries building in the Diamond District, claiming that he had an appointment with one of Bruce's employees. When informed that he missed this appointment by two days, he started throwing a fit and threatened the receptionist. When asked to leave the premises, he jumped over a chair and scratched one of the security guards in the face."

"Oh, *yikes*, this guy sounds bonkers!" Steph is reading faster than Tim could speak, and she cuts him off to continue. "He was forced off the premises and he left before police got involved. The security guard who was scratched went to the hospital a few minutes later because he started feeling extremely ill. Doctors determined that the cause was from the venom of a *snake*, but his only injuries were the scratches on his face. This worsened over time, and the guard died as a result, in only two hours since the scratch."

"Sounds like this guy is a snake meta," Dick frowns, stating the obvious. Jason knows it's how he works through his thoughts, but it gets a little annoying sometimes. Or maybe Jason is just annoyed thinking about this bastard. "How come this is the only way we heard about this? It happened at WI, we should have known the second it happened."

"It was in Bruce's folders, but it was a few days ago, before we knew about Ohnn. It was deemed low-urgency because there wasn't anyone to spare and no one else came up dead

with the same injuries.” Tim explains, drawing up pictures from the file.

The scratches on the guard’s face are black, rotting around the edges. His lips had turned blue, his eyes bloodshot. A sheen of sweat covers his pale skin, the bags under his eyes a dark color like death. His temperature was 103 at it’s highest, and he died moments after the picture was taken.

Peter wasn’t scratched, was he? He didn’t look it, when he was talking to Jason. He didn’t say there was anything else, but would he have told Jason? Should they check on him again? What if in this time, Peter died, because they didn’t know about this venom? He doubts that Peter would go to a clinic or to a hospital at all.

Or not. This guard died two hours after meeting with Ohnn and getting scratched, and they had been out long enough that Jason would have started seeing signs.

“Sounds like the bastard that Peter described.” Jason seethes, eye twitching as he imagines punching the man’s face in. He has to distract himself from the idea, or he’s going to work himself up into a spiral. Instead, Jason latches onto that nagging feeling in the back of his mind and picks up his phone, opening the photo gallery.

“Any security footage you can pull up?” Dick leans over Tim’s chair.

“Yeah, let me see.”

Jason finds the folder he’s looking for, Peter’s face in his mind. The tan skin, the shape of his eyes, his nose and the dimples on his cheeks when he manages a smile... even his anger reminded Jason of someone. Defensive anger, always for someone else, but hiding the rest of their emotions. Well, not hiding. They wear it on their sleeve, but they think that not talking about it will keep it hidden.

“Here he is.” Steph points out. She and Dick both are in Tim’s space, eager to see the screen. “He really is throwing a fit! Look at him throw that briefcase!”

“Where’s he going? Can we follow him?” Dick bites at his nail, eyes glued to the screen. There’s a shining rage in his eyes that Jason huffs at under his breath. Maybe Dick will kill the guy before Jason can.

He finds the picture he’s looking for, zooming in on one face in particular. Not that he would ever let his family know, but he keeps pictures of them in his phone. As many as he can, as if scared he’ll forget their faces one day. He’s not, but it’s like he is. (Clinging on to the real memories they had, so the Green will leave him alone.)

Dick is around 16 years old in this picture, smiling at the camera with a busted nose from some fight a millions years ago that Jason can’t remember the story for.

...It isn’t exact, but the resemblance is ~~uncanny~~ very close. Peter looks a ~~lot~~ a bit like Dick had around that age.

Jason tells himself that it's because the kid just *happens* to look like Dick, that they share similar stories. That's why he draws the conclusion, that's why Jason feels so strongly about this one random kid. He'd feel the same for any other kid with the same story. The coincidence is just that: a coincidence.

He puts his phone back in his pocket, not sure if he convinced himself of anything, and tries to pay attention to what the others are saying.

"Wait a minute, did you see that?"

"See what?" Steph asks. Tim pauses the recording to point into the crowd of people on the sidewalk.

Jonathan Ohnn, they assume, is at the foreground, scratching at his own cheek, his teeth gritted with rage and his unnaturally yellow eyes bugging out of his face. Jason commits the face to memory, convinced that he'll have a hard time holding back when he finally stands in front of this bastard.

However, Tim is pointing to the background.

A background that Peter is in.

"Hold the phone, is he *following* this lunatic? By himself?" Dick worries his lip, eyes widening as Tim plays the video. Sure enough, Peter is walking the same path as Ohnn, sticking far enough back so as not to be spotted. "Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he recognized him." Tim says slowly, but he's disappointed at digital Peter for doing something so reckless. "He said his dad wasn't telling him anything. Maybe he got fed up with that, and didn't know that Ohnn was dangerous or not yet."

It still doesn't sit right with them... But they have no room to talk.

"Hold on... this is where..." Tim lowers his voice, brows furrowing. Only Steph seems to understand what he means.

"Oh my god, it is!"

"Where, Blondie?" Jason grunts, getting up to look at the screen better.

"Look," She points at Peter. He's stopped in front of an alley, watching Ohnn leave with one foot in the air. He's conflicted, visibly trying to keep going but something is holding him back. He stays, shakes his head, and chooses to jog into the alley instead. "He really did that just for a stranger?"

"Did *what*? Where is he going?"

"This is where Steph ended up hiding after Two-Face and her fought." Tim answers, and Steph distantly traces the wound in her side that is still healing.

“Peter gave up following Ohnn and getting answers just to help me.” Steph groans. She attempts to flop dramatically into her chair again, but she goes slow as to not aggravate her wound and it ruins any effect. She spins for good measure, as if to make up for it. “Why does he have to be such a good kid? Now I *really* feel like I need to thank him.”

-

Speed and stealth are Peter’s strong suits.

Not that he isn’t strong- he can lift up to ten tons and if he isn’t careful, he could punch someone’s jaw clean off their face.

But Peter doesn’t rely on his strength. In fact, he is constantly holding back on it. It’s actually more effort to do this, and can strain him in battle. But he *doesn’t* battle as often as the people of New York might think he does. Spider-Man saving a cat from a tree doesn’t go viral, his fights with the Armadillo or Leap Frog or the occasional stopping of a car accident or a train do.

Peter prefers speed and stealth when he isn’t swinging into the scene. Stalking into the shadows and observing from above, like a real spider lying in wait. He’s gotten even better at it since Natasha started teaching him how to erase his presence in a room. And with his abilities to climb on walls, he can hide in the unlikeliest of places to hide.

It’s helped him more than he thought it would, this past week.

Ever since his conversation with Red Hood at the taco truck, Peter has seen a shift in the Bats around Gotham. The stalking hasn’t ended, not really. He can tell Red Robin stops by on more than one occasion during the evenings to see if Peter is sticking to Benny’s as Red Hood advised him to.

And Peter does. He even helps Benny out at the restaurant, and he heads up to bed afterwards without going out of the building even once. He turns off his light and goes to bed.

Spider-Man doesn’t.

Red Hood told *Peter* to stay to inside in order to avoid Ohnn. He didn’t tell Spider-Man. Tony often tells him that his ability to think of loop-holes in every rule is going to get him grounded at some point. But Peter would find a loophole then, too.

It doesn’t take much to get out without notice. Red Robin goes about his business once Peter is in bed for at least an hour, convinced that he’s in dreamland, safe and sound. Then Peter suits up, attaches the Jumping Radar to his wrist, and sneaks out the window.

He avoids working where the Bats’ watchful eyes might see him. They have a system in place, and it’s honestly pretty decent and *hard* to work around. But he does, because *that’s* what he’s good at. And he has the advantage of higher senses.

Signal patrols during evenings and daytime, mostly in Fashion and Diamond districts. He isn’t hard to avoid, because Peter is himself during the daytime. Red Hood is based in Crime

Alley- which only affirms that they stalk Peter, because Peter is based in the Upper East Side, across a river. This is where Batman and Robin (Peter thinks Robin might be around his age) usually are.

Red Robin is also in Crime Alley, but he mostly sticks to the Bowery (which is right next to Crime Alley), and he patrols Burnley as well. Peter doesn't go near those places even as Spider-Man, but he might have to at some point if he doesn't spot Ohnn in the other districts.

Spoiler sticks to Old Gotham, Chinatown, and the Tri-Corner. Nightwing patrols the University, Coventry, and Upper West Side when he's here- there are absences that he takes note of, and he's heard from Benny that Nightwing mostly belongs to a city named Bludhaven. And though they all have their preferred districts, they meet up with each other in certain zones. Probably to relay information to each other.

Though in the last week, there's been more of a scatter to their routines. Peter supposes it could be due to him telling Red Hood about Ohnn. It would make sense that they want to catch a meta with a dangerous device that makes him hard to catch, who is trying to steal money and parts off of people. But it could also be due to one of those other villains getting out.

Peter thinks the guy is named Killer Croc, and that is tons cooler than "Leap Frog" in his opinion. That Arkham Asylum place is always losing their charges, and Peter thinks they should look into getting that place more security.

But that isn't his business. Right now, Peter is focused on catching Ohnn. He had to learn their schedules in order to do that, because he doesn't want to waste time getting into a potential fight with the vigilantes over territories or whatnot.

And that means Peter gets to practice his stealth.

He has to go out into the open when stopping a mugging, a carjacking, whatever pops up into the night. But the moment it has died down, Peter slinks back into the shadows between buildings. Just like he is right now.

Only, that's because there's a certain Robin around these parts.

The University District looks different at night. Even though the Gotham Public Library is an empty void, that doesn't mean the rest of the district is. During the daytime, the streets can be filled with people going about their business. There's the university, the mall center, and Gotham Hospital all right there, leaving a constant buzz of activity.

But not at night. At night, it becomes students passing from bar to bar, risking their *lives* to get drunk, because Gotham is that bad, but they don't seem to care. Peter will never understand alcohol.

He means it. Not just because he's 14, and he has a memory Aunt May letting him taste a sip and it being so nasty he swore alcohol off for the rest of his life, but also because his metabolism would never allow it. ~~And, well... He doesn't have the best of luck with those who drink alcohol around him.~~

Peter presses himself against the wall, his back feeling the shiver of the cold stone and brick. The sky is thick with the smell of coming rain, and Peter wonders if his patrol is going to be cut short tonight. There's a bar filled with drunk uni students below, but Peter is only focused on the whisper of '*close near where close near*' in his spider-sense.

He figured out what it's trying to tell him as he leaped over to the next building. Peter's ears prick at the groaning sounds from a block or two over, and he crawls up to the roof above him just as a rumble shakes the foundations. The hair on his body stands up at attention, trembling with the air around him, and then:

BOOM?

BOOM!

A dust cloud rises from a few blocks over, car alarms rip through the night. The smoke thickens in the air and a loud roar echoes over the Gotham streets. The bar-hoppers scurry to get inside in a drunken panic, pushing each other out of the way. Peter jogs to the other end of the building, ready to jump off the side- when he remembers *why* he was hiding in the first place.

hello!

Peter ducks down just in time, swerving to see the flash of blue and black in the light. The Robin he was hoping to avoid has sprung into action with a graceful sweep through the air. Peter sinks into the shadows of the building, only to find his eyes drawn to how the Robin swings.

It's different than the others. Though Peter has only seen glimpses in the night, he knows that Nightwing- he doesn't just *swing* like the others. It's an act. A catch and throw game that he's playing, like an inside joke. Peter's eyes are glued to it, wondering if he looks the same.

His feet move without him telling them to, and he doesn't stop. He follows Nightwing, curiosity eating away at him. How does he move like there's no air around him? It's so effortless, like he's on strings, but he isn't.

Peter hops over a water silo and pads along the side of a building, wondering how close is *too* close before he's spotted. It's a chase between the two vigilantes, one unaware that the other has spotted the show.

It's- It's like a performer.

Peter recalls watching his father's tapes of his grandparents. They were trapeze artists, gymnasts who spent their whole lives training to fly. His father died before he got to show Peter the videos that he had, but Ben found them in the attic one day. They set up the old VHS tapes, and Peter savored the quality of the video, looking back in time like it was a storybook.

He wanted to fly like that. Maybe that's why a part of Peter enjoys being Spider-Man so much. He doesn't know where those old videos had ended up; probably somewhere in a box

in the storage unit for Ben or his father. But Peter followed along to their performances and pretended he was one of them enough times for him to memorize a few of their moves.

Of course, back then, he had asthma and a penchant for breaking anything he touched or looked at. He wasn't holding out hopes that he could be a gymnast, not in reality. The dream had crashed before it even started. They were poor before Aunt May died, then they were poor after. His foster-families certainly never even considered letting Peter take a lesson, though that is due to Peter never mentioning it. They wouldn't have even if they had known.

But now? Peter savors the feeling, tries to get closer and closer to the people he only got to know through their videos. He always wondered what his dad saw, if he had ever watched the home tapes.

Nightwing swings like that. With practiced ease of a trapeze artist, a professional who's done this since birth.

Peter wants to get closer. He smiles when he notices the flips are just for fun- maybe his way of getting amped up before he throws himself into a fight. Peter does something similar.

So he dares. He dares to get closer, to step right next to the light. He runs, hopping over windows and ducking under pipes, leaping over boxes and stretching to keep up. Peter flies, holding his breath as he gets to the ends of the block, where he *has* to cut off before Nightwing would surely notice. He stands on the precipice, toeing the edge of the line, leaning forward as his hand sticks to the wall behind him. Peter wonders if the chips in the roofs he comes across are caused by years of swinging around Gotham.

Just one more second. Just to see what he'll do.

Nightwing's grappling hook sinks into the building ahead of him. His feet push out in front of him, mid swing and Peter watches the anticipation to his next trick-

WRONG! broken! catch! HELP!

Peter shakes his head as the spider-sense hits him full force. He lets go of the wall, eyes trained on Nightwing, then flicking his gaze up at the grappling hook just as the roof it had sunk into crumbles underneath it.

His strong suits are speed and stealth. Stealth that hides him in the night, able to follow someone as they leap through the air. And speed- that accounts for *most* of what Peter can do.

Time slows down for Peter.

He's noticed it before, or rather, he was *told* about it. What looks like seconds to an outside observer feels like a minute for Peter. Thoughts rattling around his head and screaming- it's why he rambles so much. Or maybe the rambling is helped along by the time being slowed.

Nightwing's fall is slow, Peter's thoughts are loud, and his reaction time is unmatched.

His feet dig into the stone as he drops to a runner's start. He attaches two webs to the solid brick of the building, and pushes off to jump underneath Nightwing's trajectory. Air whips

around him with a sharp cutting noise as Peter lands on the side of the opposite building on the other side of the street, sticking to the wall. He feels the tug of the web and all of the hair on his body stands on end.

!!Caught Caught Caught!!

Peter sticks the other end of the webbing against the wall. He stands up, looking sideways to see Nightwing had landed on his back in the webbing-net he made. The buzzing in his head dissipates the moment Nightwing is safe.

Safe and *confused*, actually.

“What the...”

Peter strides across the spider-silk, balancing on the rope and standing at the base of the web that turns into net. The webbing doesn't move underneath his feet, the only vibrations coming from the struggling vigilante.

Nightwing is sinking into the webbing, attempting to roll over and get out. His mouth is hung open in surprise, pulling at his hands and feet only to find they can't budge. Peter lets out a giggle on accident- it's always a little amusing to watch people react to the webbing for the first time.

Nightwing startles and turns his head backwards to view Peter upside down-ish, jaw dropped and trying to tilt his head to see him.

“Nice to see you drop by.” Peter tilts his head, holding his hands together in front of him. Peter waves by wiggling his fingers, sinking into a crouch to view Nightwing closer. It's weird to see the vigilante while in his own suit, with him having no idea that Peter is Spider-Man. Boy is he glad for his voice modulator right now.

“You- Hey, you're that Spiderkid,” Nightwing points out.

“Uh, yeah, I am. But the name's Spider-*Man*. The 'man' is important to me.”

“Is it?” Nightwing tries to free his hand from the web, and Peter scooches back just in case the guy is harboring secret abilities and he manages to get out. “Is this what you're doing in Gotham? Catching other vigilantes that drop out of the sky?”

“It's what I'm doing right now.” Peter grins, though the other can't see behind his mask. He really should add that eye feature so it's noticeable. “You should be careful where you aim that grappling hook.”

“So you've never done the same with your webs?”

“Nope.” Peter pops the 'p.' “But I can see why *you* did it.”

Nightwing scoffs, though it sounds like he's laughing. That's good, at least. “Well, SpiderMan, how long am I supposed to be in this web?”

Peter hums again, standing up and turning to look down the street. He can hear another roar rip across the night, and smell the fire as an old building crumbles away. He shouldn't stall the man any further.

"If you promise to be chill, I'll let you out right now." Peter says, pointing the way Tony does when he wants to get a point across. That's how adults speak to each other, right?

"Otherwise, it'll dissolve in 30 minutes."

"30 minutes!?" Nightwing gawks at him, attempting to sit up and then realizing he can't.

"Why wouldn't I be chill?"

"Uh, you'd be surprised how many vigilantes get mad when you're in their territory. I don't feel like being shot or stabbed again, I'm kinda busy." Peter says, and Nightwing's brows furrow. Is he squinting at Peter?

"How long have you *been* a vigilante?"

"A while." Peter states vaguely. "Do you want out or not?"

Nightwing huffs, as if really debating it. "What are you in Gotham for?"

"Business." Peter starts walking backwards along the rope. "Going *once*..."

"Business? What kind?"

"Hey, man, I'm not here to do anything stupid. Just got my own stuff to worry about, and then I'll be outta your hair. Going *twice*..." Peter raises his voice a little higher, taking another big step backward.

Nightwing groans, staring at his hands and feet. It's pointless to thrash around, there's no way he's getting out until it dissolves. Peter knows what is more important- but he seriously doesn't want to get into another turf war. He got tired the first time around.

"Goinnnnnnnng-"

"Alright, alright, I wouldn't attack you." Nightwing promises. "I won't. Please let me out?"

Peter doesn't sense an untruth. And he also doesn't *want* to leave Nightwing in the webbing that long, not when people are in danger. He nods, satisfied with that. He's already seen that he's faster than Nightwing, so if he tries to attack, Peter will run.

He's running anyways.

Peter presses a button on his webshooter, spraying out the web dissolvant around Nightwing. Before he can fall through, Peter catches the man's wrist, thwips another web on the lamp post, and they swing down to the pavement.

Peter drops him safely to the ground, using the momentum of the swing to flip backwards onto the top of the lamppost. He spares one more glance at Nightwing- *don't ask him to teach you anything*- before he leaps upwards towards a building.

“See ya!”

Nightwing had just turned around to reply when Peter had slunk back into the shadows. The only evidence he was there is a web in the wind.

Peter hops between two buildings, barely looking back at where he left Nightwing and rising up towards the roofs again a few blocks away. He scatters into the wind, putting more and more distance between him and the rampaging villain and the vigilantes.

He falls off of the side of one building, recalling how Nightwing did a certain flip... He itches to try it out as he plummets closer to the ground.

Just once won't kill him, right?

He thwips out his webbing, pulling himself up at the last second. He attempts to copy the other vigilante, burning the steps into his head much the same that he burned the old TV with the image of his grandparents' tapes of their gymnastic routines. He holds on through the low point of the drop, brings himself upwards, and flips forwards.

He releases himself into the air as he turns upside down- his mind stalling with the view of the city reaching towards the sky. When he's right side up again, he lifts his legs up to his chest, and thwips out a new web to swing upside down.

Peter lets out a whoop as he flips backwards during the swing, catching himself with another web and circling around a block corner. That's *way* more fun than he thought it would be!

He's about to try it again when the Jumping Radar beeps out at him.

Peter lands on the side of a building, sticking his back and his feet to the wall and lifting his wrist to see what he's got. His pulse quickens as he spots a turbulence of air down the block. He only has seconds to act!

He leaps off the side, swinging over to the direction just as a flash of light appears. He thwips a web to Ohnn's foot, yanking the man upward into the air as soon as he jumps.

Ohnn lets out a screech of terror, grabbing at the webbing and attempting to pull it off his foot. Spider-Man lands on the ground and *yanks* Ohnn down into the street. He hits the ground with a THUNK, but scrambles up so quickly that Spider-Man curses.

So he needs to put even *more* strength behind his attacks? That could get dangerous, if Spider-Man isn't careful.

Ohnn manages to get the first webbing off of his foot, but Spider-Man sticks another webbing onto his chest, pulling him closer and spinning in a circle. Ohnn holds on to the webbing, cursing at Spider-Man over the wind. Spider-Man grits his teeth and lets go when Ohnn's body gains enough momentum, slamming Ohnn into an unoccupied building.

The wall starts to crumble and Spider-Man curses, leaping over there and starting to web up the wall. He didn't know the hit would be that bad!

Ohnn, though, is getting up as if the hit had never happened. He's brushing off his clothes and spitting at Spider-Man, pointing up at him and bellowing out, "YOU ROTTEN THING!"

"Well, that wasn't very nice." Spider-Man drops into the alley, stretching his arms and holding back a shuttery breath. "You should watch how you talk to people."

You can do this, Spider-Man. He tells himself, bouncing on his toes. *No one can hurt Spider-Man. You always get back up.*

"What's your fuckin' problem, Spidey!? Huh!?" Ohnn shrieks at him, stumbling around the alley like a drunk. Spider-Man tilts his head, confused by how... un-put together he is. He knew the man was looney-toones, but to be this out of it? It's like the man is off kilter, always leaning towards the side. He only manages to stay upright by luck, flopping around instead.

"My *problem* is you. Give me that tech and I'll stop chasing you."

"It's MINEEEEE!" Ohnn caws, almost whines, seizing his own wrist and shaking it out as if to taunt Spider-Man. "You can't HAAAVE it! No one can, I worked too hard on it!"

"You're gonna hurt yourself or someone else with that thing!" Spider-Man argues, taking a step forward. Ohnn yelps and takes a step backwards, tripping over his foot. "You already-"

"I am NOT giving up now!" Ohnn protests, shaking his head violently. "I spent so many years on this! Everyone *laughed* at me, you know! You-*You* probably are laughing at me too! But I did it! I created the ability to travel dimensions! MY name will be in history books EVERYWHERE!"

He turns his back to Spider-Man.

NOW!

Spider-Man lifts his wrists to attack, but Ohnn's head whips 180 degrees to stare at Peter, his body still facing in the other direction. Spider-Man's heart sinks and he stumbles backwards, unfortunately gagging at the sight. "EW!"

"YOU!!!" Ohnn screams, turning his body around. His face contorts with rage, and his senses scream *RUN OUT NOW GO RUN AWAY NO GO-* "YOU! YOU AREN'T TAKING IT FROM ME!"

"We'll see about that!" Spider-Man runs towards him, and Ohnn reaches out with both hands to grab at him. He lunges towards Spider-Man, but he hits the deck and slides underneath the leap. He webs the man's shirt again and pulls, smacking Ohnn's forehead against the pavement.

He jumps up and flips, pulling Ohnn back out into the street. Ohnn rolls over with inhuman speed, hissing at Spider-Man and snapping the web. He jumps to his own feet, and in a bright flash of light, disappears in the air.

The Jumping Radar doesn't let him down, not this time. Spider-Man knows where he's going to appear- exactly above and behind him.

SIDE!

Spider-Man ducks to the side, narrowly missing a hand grabbing for his throat. Spider-Man webs his back, risking how close he has to get to Ohnn in order to pull the gauntlet off of his arm. Ohnn kicks at him as Spider-Man reaches around his arm, and he feels a tug at his gut as the gauntlet teleports them.

Spider-Man sucks in a breath as they appear on a roof, and Ohnn snatches at his wrist, throwing Spider-Man over his shoulder. Spider-Man lands on his back so hard that the air is knocked out of him. Spider-Man shakes his head, kicking up and slamming his heel into Ohnn's throat.

Ohnn gags, wheezing for air and grabbing at his throat. His eyes widen as he backs away from Spider-Man, who flips up onto his feet. He points at the Jumping Radar, hissing out, "WHAT is that! What did you do!?"

"You aren't the only genius in the universe, jerk." Spider-Man jumps forward, punching Ohnn in the face. Ohnn blocks the next hit, swinging one of his own. Spider-Man leans backwards to dodge it, gritting his teeth as he puts his hand on the ground. He kicks Ohnn's stomach as hard as he can without killing him, and the man flies backwards.

"URGH! DIE ALREADY, YOU NASTY BUG!"

"I'm an arachnid!" Spider-Man yells back. But his voice is caught in his throat as his spider-sense rings out:

BAD BAD BAD

Huh?

Ohnn's nails contort on his hands, sharp talons... no. No, those aren't talons. Ohnn's fingernails look like the fangs of a snake. Chills run down Spider-Man's body, and he backs away a good fifteen steps as Ohnn strikes, fast like a-

Like a *snake!*

Spider-Man has to leap off of the building in order to avoid the fangs from digging into his skin. Ohnn howls in a fury, jumping after him. Spider-Man's heart races, trying to think of a clear way to get close without getting touched by those things. He rolls into the busier street-

BUSIER STREET.

SHIT!

Spider-senses and the Jumping Radar scream at the same time. Spider-Man looks up, down, around, until his eyes land on the spot that he's about to appear. People are pointing to him in the street, phones are getting pulled out, and others are starting to run in the other direction.

BUS BUS BUS GET BUS

“I know!” Spider-Man growls at himself. Ohnn appears next to a bus, hitting the back tire.

His super strength makes the bus rear forward, the front end careening towards the street filled with pedestrians. Spider-Man jumps into the fray, noting the ash that whips into the wind.

Spider-Man webs the street and a light pole, leaping through the way of the bus. He digs his feet into the ground and pulls back as the bus pushes through the webbing, the tires squealing and citizens shrieking as their lives flash before their eyes. Spider-Man grits his teeth, pulling the bus back before it can slam into the sidewalk.

Silence rings out as he lets go of the webbing. He turns on his heel, hopping over the bus and to the side with the doors. He opens the doors with one hand, dashing up the stairs. “Is everyone okay!?”

Safe, safe, safe, worried, safe, hurt-

Peter checks on each seat inside the bus. The worst injury was a broken wrist of an elderly woman in the middle of the bus. Peter sighs in relief as he kneels next to her, citizens craning their heads and leaning over the seats to watch Spider-Man.

He doesn’t have a first aid kit on him right now, but her wrist doesn’t look too bad. To be sure, Peter should brace it temporarily.

“Miss, the webbing is gonna feel weird, but it’ll prevent the break from getting worse until the ambulance arrives.” Peter informs her. The old woman smiles at him, reaching with her good hand to pat his head.

“Oh, you’re such a sweet young man!” She coos, and Peter is glad the mask prevents him from getting more embarrassed by his red face. “You were so brave!”

“Yeah, that was sick as fuck!” A little boy shouts, jumping to see Peter over the seat with stars in his eyes. “Y’ran out in front of the bus so fast!”

“And you *caught* us, like it was nothin’!” A woman adds on, and Peter shakes his head. He slings the woman’s wrist, and another voice calls out to him.

“Hey, kid, who are ya?” It’s a familiar voice. Peter’s eyes widen as he looks at the face of the man that he first saw when he got to Gotham, the man with the paper who directed him to the library. Bus Stop Guy sits up out of his seat, his hat askew and dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. “Are you with the Bats and Robins?”

“Yeah, are ya? I’ve never seen ya before!” A teenager asks.

“I saw ‘im on Twitta!”

“It’s called-”

“Twitta!” An older woman interrupts. “I thought he looked familiar!”

Peter stands up, making his way towards the front of the bus as they call out to him. A quick glance outside tells him that they're all safe and accounted for as well. Peter relaxes his shoulders, looking back at the bus-riders.

"I'm Spider-Man." He tells them, glad that they're alright. "I'm not a Bat or a Robin. But we're on the same team. Ish."

"Well, whatever y'are, I'm glad y'were here!" The bus driver wipes his brow, fanning his face to calm down. "Can we--"

"I gotta get going, everybody." Peter says, and the young boy whines in protest. "Vigilante duties call! I'm glad you're all okay!"

"Bye, Spider-Man!" Someone shouts as he exits the bus, and he hears more calls as he swings out of the street.

Peter collapses onto a nearby roof, groaning with slightly sore muscles. It was harder to stop that bus than it should have been. He isn't eating enough for his metabolism. It's making him slower, making him weaker.

Making him more like Peter.

But we are Peter.

"Just great," Peter sits up, his head in his hands. "He's a snake mutant. Just perfect."

Peter isn't so sure what would win between a snake and a spider. But he's sure as hell going to make sure it's the spider this time. He was hoping that Ohnn was a reptilian mutant, not a serpent. Serpents move quicker.

The nail fangs... and that NECK THING. Peter shivers, resisting the urge to get a little sick. That was *nasty*, he can't believe that Ohnn can do that.

Peter almost had him this time, though. If only he hadn't led Ohnn to such a busy street. Maybe he can lure Ohnn somewhere more abandoned, next time? Ugh, this is all so disheartening. Yet again, Ohnn got away because he missed something.

??? Hey now who???

He sits up, turning to see what is causing his spider-sense to tingle. There's nothing there... He jumps to his feet, walking around the roof curiously. What could he be missing? Is someone-

Someone is watching him.

He freezes as he spots them. It's a Bat he doesn't recognize, mostly hidden in shadow, save for her hand. As if she wanted him to see her. Shivers run down his spine, trying to listen for a sign of her. Even her heartbeat is quiet, as if she knew how to silence it.

What is she doing there? How long as she been watching him?

She steps out of the shadows, a curious lean to her body language. She's studying him.

Her costume is familiar, if only because it's as hidden as Batman's in the night. Dark as the sky and shadows, a mask that resembles Batman's, a cape that swishes out as she stalks over the roofs. And a proud yellow and black bat symbol on her chest, clearly making a statement that she wanted him to know. *I'm here, and I was seeing you.*

How long as she been in the city? The entire time? Peter had not once noticed her here, and he thought he had noticed everyone. The idea that she could *know* everything makes his stomach churn.

She doesn't approach him. Instead, she waves goodbye, and sinks back into the shadows.

-

"You're *late!*" Red Hood hisses through the comms as Nightwing swings into the fight. Killer Croc meets wall to snout with a resounding *SMACK*, missing Red Hood by a thread. The wall crumbles overhead, crushing Killer Croc's head beneath the stone. He isn't down, not yet, because he's still thrashing around and trying to get out.

The street is a mess by the time Nightwing gets there, though it probably already was the second Killer Croc finally started his rampage. He'll have to use Bruce's card to help with the clean up when the fight is over. It certainly didn't help that Nightwing was a minute behind on getting there- but at least he didn't come empty handed.

"I ran into that SpiderMan." Nightwing informs them, landing on a car that had been busted in.

"You *what?*" Red Robin nearly stops himself mid swing to whirl around at Nightwing, but he flips and lands on the street to hide behind a car. Red Hood ducks behind the car Nightwing is standing on, one hand reaching into his utility belt to grab at the tranq gun they keep on them just for this. "You've gotta be *fucking* kidding me. What happened? What did he say?"

"SpiderMan?" Red Hood huffs, clicking the safety off of the tranq gun as Killer Croc unearths himself from the rubble. "That his name? He looks like a baby, from what I heard."

"It's very important to him that we use the 'man.'" He repeats. But he agrees with Red Hood. The kid was around Damian's age, and that certainly isn't a man. SpiderBoy would be more accurate.

"Well?" Red Robin is aiming his own tranq gun at the soft spots in Croc's armored skin. The tranqs bounce off, just missing the areas by a thread. He sounds just as aggravated now as everyone has heard him when the topic of Spider-Man is brought up. "What did he say? What was he like? Should we be worried? Did he explain himself?"

Killer Croc rears around like a bull, grabbing rubble off of the ground as a precursor to smacking them over the head with it. Red Robin curses and flips off of the car, running to hide as Killer Croc aims for Nightwing and his spots. Nightwing ducks away, spotting Red Hood running towards Croc's blindspot.

"I think he's funny," Nightwing comments, and he hears Red Robin groan in their comms as he gets out of range.

"That sounds like hell."

"He also kinda saved my ass back there." Nightwing reaches into his utility belt, hand brushing past the grappling hook. "My hook snagged on a bad part of a building and I almost ate it on the pavement."

~~He ignores the fact that his hands had shaken for a minute, after realizing how bad it could have been. Just like=~~

"He caught you?" Red Hood grunts as he ducks out of the way of Croc's claws. They slice through a light pole and the pole careens into the window of a shop.

"He made a *net* with that spider-webbing that people keep mentioning." Nightwing aims his tranq at the underside of Croc's armpit. Tranq sinks into flesh, but Croc still isn't done. He needs another tranq before that can happen. "It was pretty cool, if unpleasant to touch."

"So what's his deal?" Red Robin grows impatient.

"Wouldn't tell me." Nightwing rolls towards a trash can as Croc sniffs out where the tranq had come from. "But he swears he isn't here for trouble."

"Do we really think it's a coincidence he arrived around the same time that Ohnn guy showed up?" Red Robin sneaks around to Croc's blind side, gritting his teeth when Croc abruptly changes course and heads his way. *"Aw, shit."*

Red Hood uses this to his advantage, tranq bullet biting into the back of Croc's knee. Croc stumbles down and Red Robin leaps over his head, seconds away from Croc snapping down and biting his foot.

Croc rolls over as Red Robin puts another tranq into his side- just in case. They pause for a few moments, watching as his breathing gets slower and slower. Eventually, it puts to a slow sleeping sigh, and they release their fighting stances.

The other two vigilantes are far more out of breath than Nightwing is, putting in more work than he had. He bites down his worry, knowing that one wouldn't appreciate it and the other would just tell him to keep it to himself or die.

Brothers... Why can't they just let him fuss over them?

"I don't know if it's a coincidence or not. But I don't think he was lying to me." Nightwing admits. He puts his hands on his hips as Red Robin waves down the street. The police that had held back during the fight now come rushing forward, so they have to get out.

Their trio hurries out of police reach, observing from the top of a building to make sure nothing goes wrong with transport. At least until Killer Croc inevitably gets his way out of Arkham again, they don't have to worry.

Red Robin sits on the building, catching his breath and mulling this over as his legs dangle on the side. “Batgirl is out tonight. Maybe she’ll get a chance to figure out what SpiderMan is up to. If him being here is related to Ohnn, and he isn’t a threat to us, then we should try and work with him.”

“I wonder if he knows anything about Peter and Tony.” Red Hood’s comment lets slip another frustrated groan from Red Robin.

“I would *love* if someone could have any idea about those two.”

“I take it nothing has come up still?” Nightwing sits down next to him. He hopes that Peter is staying inside right now, and isn’t out doing who knows what- like following dangerous men in the streets and stumbling across bleeding vigilantes again.

He still doesn’t understand that. Why would Peter make a decision like that? Unless he thought that Ohnn wouldn’t hurt him? But Ohnn certainly proved that he could and would, no matter what Peter tries to tell them. He’s alleviating their worry for no reason- it’s their *job* to take down bad guys who pull this crap.

He just has to get them closer as civilians. If they can gain Peter’s trust... maybe they could take Peter in?

No, no. He wants Peter to have a normal childhood. Even if it means they don’t get to see it. It would be awful to drag another kid into this world, risking their life every day and night.

But the idea of Peter sitting at home with them doesn’t sound bad. Not at all.

“Nothing, nada, zilch. A big fat goose egg of *nothing*.” Red Robin complains, laying back on the roof with his arms above his head. “But him being right about Ohnn and clearly having gotten his ass kicked gives him some credibility.”

“You think he’s lying?”

Nightwing knows it comes out funny, because-

“You think he *isn’t*?” Red Robin sits up again, gawking at Nightwing. “Blue...”

“Look, I know he’s keeping secrets, but I don’t think he is responsible for Ohnn. I think he’s really gotten mixed up in something because of this Tony guy. And Peter is just trying to defend him, even if he shouldn’t.”

None of them can argue with that. It sounds right on the money.

Ba-ding.

Red Robin’s lip curls in displeasure. “*That’s* your notification noise? What is wrong with you?”

“I like this one,” Nightwing pulls out his phone. “It sounds like a little bird with a bell.”

“Everything is wrong with you.” Red Hood has his own phone out, scrolling through the Batchat like Nightwing. He pauses, and lets out a laugh, pointing at his phone and showing them the screen. “You seein’ this?”

Nightwing *is* seeing this.

Cass has sent a video of SpiderMan in their chat.

It starts with a frame of Nightwing in the background, SpiderMan leaving him behind. Cass follows in the shadows, keeping an eye on him. SpiderMan swings- Wow. Nightwing can’t help but grin.

He knew that SpiderMan had to have been nearby to be able to catch him, but he didn’t know that SpiderMan had been watching him long enough to see what he was doing while swinging around. It’s the exact same swinging that Nightwing was having fun with before the grappling hook gave in.

“Huh...” Nightwing watches. The kid is a natural. He picked up the moves incredibly fast, if he hasn’t done it before. Nightwing is surprised, but pretty impressed that he pulled it off so easily. Maybe even a little jealous.

And he grins wider when he hears SpiderMan let out a little whoop as he swings. He’s having just as much fun as Nightwing does when he can pull off that move.

“He’s just like Blue over here...” Red Robin complains. “Look at him, showing off like that. No wonder you like him.”

“He’s having fun,” Nightwing defends, laughing as SpiderMan takes the corner, and Cass struggles to keep up even with her training. The kid is *fast*, even faster than Nightwing thought.

“Whoa...” Red Hood stares at his phone. “That was impressive.”

“Hey, spoiler alert!” Red Robin shushes him. “I’m behind you!”

“This kid...” Red Hood shakes his head, taunting Red Robin, who complains again. “Watch how fast he can change direction.”

Nightwing does watch, and he’s just the same amount of impressed. The kid fights like nobody’s business, keeping up with- “That’s Ohnn!” -despite the man being a meta.

“So SpiderMan and Ohnn *do* have something to do with each other.” Red Robin whistles. “But at least they’re enemies. This is looking good... Damn! Did you see that kick to the stomach!? He has better balance than you do, Blue!”

Nightwing checks the messages underneath the video.

Cass [11:39PM]: :thumbsup:

Duuuuke [11:43PM]: holy moly this guy is fast

Duuuuke [11:43PM]: like wtf

Damian [11:44PM]: Did you see him swing that man around like he is a hammer thrower in the Olympics?

Damian [11:44PM]: I demand we search for him immediately.

Duuuuke [11:45PM]: I mean yeah we need to and Tim is doing that but why?

Damian [11:45PM]: Father must convince him to join the team. At least to spar with me.

Duuuuke [11:46PM]: I doubt that it would be THAT easy

Bruce [11:47PM]: :thumbsup:

Duuuuke [11:47PM]: wow. it was that easy

Damian [11:48PM]: YES

Duuuuke [11:48PM]: wait aren't you supposed to be getting to bed

Damian [11:50PM]: Aren't you supposed to learn to mind your business?

Duuuuke [11:50PM]: WOOOOOOOW you're just gonna hate crime me, huh?

Damian [11:51PM]: Deal with it, or die. Not my problem.

-

Peter is growing more and more tired by the day. Not just mentally tired (though it certainly is hitting the hardest), but *physically* tired too.

His enhanced metabolism is meant for five meals a day, technically speaking. But there isn't enough time in the world *normally* for him to eat that much, let alone in an alternate universe where he's homeless again. There's no way he's going to bother Benny for food like that, not a chance. Benny's is struggling to get customers (despite that the place has the best burger this side of Gotham ((Peter would have no idea if that's true. He's only tried Benny's and he has a bias.))

In his own universe, he eats bigger dinner proportions and has snacks during the day to tide him over. "*To keep your growing spiders strong and healthy.*" Pepper would remind him, when Peter said it was too much (it wasn't). FRIDAY was the one who had to remind Tony and Peter both when it was time to eat and sleep. They'd just get caught up in a whirlwind of ideas and projects, and when that happened, time would stop existing for them.

But no matter what, he was getting enough to eat for the first time in a long time. And now? He certainly isn't eating as much as he should be even if he had a normal metabolism, and it's starting to affect him.

Peter noticed it during his fight with Ohnn two nights ago, when he caught that bus. He's growing weaker, and what is *crazy* to him is that he would *never* have noticed that he wasn't eating enough if his body hadn't gotten used to eating the proper amount. He fights just like before, but he can *tell* how fast he could be now.

He arrived in this world on October 2nd, and today is October 18th. The more time he spends here, the weaker he is getting. But he doesn't *have* the money or resources to eat as much as he should.

So what he can't make up for in strength because he's getting weaker, he has to make up for in smarts. And that means sacrificing his emergency money to get cheap hardware for a lab in his room, because he certainly can't update the Jumping Radar without proper equipment. It's a miracle he got what he did without a proper soldering iron.

The Jumping Radar could be improved if Peter were to accurately detect when Ohnn first appears, and how far the radius of his jumps can spread. He only ever seems to make small jumps, and then the dimensional jumps, differentiated by a flash of bright light verses turning to ash. And the black out- Peter should start looking out for that, maybe he'll be able to see it on the news? Benny has a TV...

Peter just has to make better tech, and he could get Ohnn on the ropes... And get better armor. Those fang nail things were no joke.

His current suit is made out of Kevlar and spandex, with a layer of fabric over the top made out of high-strength spider silk that makes it hard to cut. Peter's had several suits over the years, but before Tony, all he had was spandex he had to save up for, and it wasn't as reliable because it could get ripped. But there isn't enough Kevlar or spider-silk in his suit to resist the super strength that Ohnn has, and those claws could find a way to scratch Peter. He isn't eager to see what kind of venom the guy is packing in that punch. So he might need to lose some flexibility and start adding on body armor.

Which costs money.

That Peter doesn't have.

There's so much he needs to account for, that it's driving him crazy! He's always been painfully aware of grocery prices, but when he's working on a budget that maybe expands \$20 or less every other day, it feels impossible.

Peter stares at the line of hardware equipment in front of him, debating on how much \$367 can get him. The hardware store that he found is in the Upper East End, thankfully, because while Peter is looking for cheap stuff, he wasn't planning to go to the Bowery to find something cheaper. So if he hadn't found one here, he would have had to go to Old Gotham or the other, more expensive, districts in order to find something.

So here he is, standing in a store and doing the math in his head about what he can afford to get.

And *ugh*... Peter is gonna have to give up on the body armor idea before he even gets started. Just looking at the prices for all of the stuff he needs is enough to cut that idea off completely. Peter ignores the sound of the bell at the front door in favor of biting his thumb nail and tapping his foot anxiously, squinting at the row of tools.

He has to focus on the Jumping Radar, he reasons. Body armor isn't as much of a priority, he'll just have to be more careful.

But what tools does he get? He got by with the tools that Benny had laying around, but he needs his own set if he wants to keep this thing running. Screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches, hammers, a new soldering iron, dremel tool, calipers, rulers, measuring tapes, multi meter, safety glasses, ear protection, gloves-

And *then* he's gonna need electronic components, like wires, resistors, capacitors, a breadboard kit for prototyping and testing circuits without soldering- oh, *man*, he can only imagine how well the Jumping Radar could do with he had a 3D printer!

No no no, Peter, think about what you can do, and don't cry about what you lost.

All of this adds up to stuff that he can't afford, not with the amount he has. Maybe he should get back into the fixing-up business... That kind of work used to get him a good few hundred a week, just because he was in so much demand. Everyone always needs at least one thing fixed around their business or their house, and Peter was the one to call if you lived in Queens.

He could do a lot of that in Gotham. *Everything* needs fixing around here.

Peter bites the bullet and picks up a new soldering iron kit, a dremel tool, breadboard kit, a caliper, and a wrench kit, because he needs those the most. And for good measure he grabs goggles and headphones, muttering the math out loud.

Started with \$367... ending up with about \$177.89, if his math is right. Oh, but taxes... so around \$175.

That's not *too* bad. Peter stares at his basket of items, chewing on his bottom lip. He'll have to save up what he gets from Benny... and he'll have to start up his fixing up business, like he thought. He won't get as much, because he'll have to start with lower pricing, but he might not stand out too much if he risks it, and that's enough to convince him to consider it. Maybe most people will leave him alone because of his age, like they did in New York.

But there *is* always a risk that he could pick the wrong client and they try to make him 'work' for them. Peter is well aware that some people would take advantage of his engineering habit. He should be careful about that, like always. He's not going to get caught up in *any* sort of fishy business.

Benny has the rest of the tools he needs, and Benny never asks what he's doing in there. His only rule was no drugs or funny business, and Peter is sure that the man probably tracks where his things are going to make sure Peter is following them.

It's the only reason that Peter resists grabbing beakers so he can make his web fluid at Benny's instead of sneaking into a school next time. Because there isn't a lot of reason for him to have those lying around, and he can't explain it away with 'webbing.'

Peter checks his basket again, letting out a sigh as he walks down the aisle and closer to the windows.

October 18th. That's 17 days he's been here, and it's getting colder outside. It's starting to look like Peter might be spending Halloween here in Gotham... Tony, Pepper, and he were supposed to go to see a new scary movie that was coming out.

~~Maybe they'll go without him...~~

Peter shakes his head. Colder. He'll have to spend the rest of his money on getting a thicker coat, or *two*, because he'll need one as Spider-Man. His suit doesn't have a heating system or anything like that, because when he made it, he hadn't thought about needing it. Tony said they would add it to his next suit.

Can \$175 get him a new coat or two? Like, *proper* winter ones?

...watching...

He subtly turns to face the rack, looking out of his peripherals. There's an older boy at the end of the aisle that doesn't look like he's watching Peter, but he's the only other person in the store save for the cashier.

Peter pretends to look at a pack of brushes, kneeling down and wondering if he was just in the boy's way. When the feeling doesn't go away, and the guy just keeps inching closer to where Peter is, he finds it hard to believe that this guy is actually just paying attention to the shelves.

What could he want? Is he wondering why a 14 year old is getting stuff from a hardware store? Or is it something else?

As the boy gets closer, Peter stands up, setting the brush pack down and choosing to go to another aisle. He doesn't want to deal with whatever this guy is up to. Apparently, that's not what the guy wanted, because he suddenly blurts out:

"Hey, uh, do you know where to find the wrench kits?"

Peter and the boy stare at each other for a long stretch of silence. Peter's gaze drifts to the wrench kit right in front of his face, then back to him. He's familiar, now that he is getting a good look at the guy face to face...

"Wait, are you Coupon Guy?" Peter points at him, and the name immediately makes the guy's face scrunch up.

"Yeah, uh, that's me. I thought you looked familiar..." The boy rubs the back of his neck. So he had recognized Peter from the stairwell? Peter releases his guard, feeling much better knowing this isn't going south. "Wrench kits?"

“Aisle three, middle shelf.” Peter grins cheekily.

Coupon raises a brow at the specificity, looking up to the aisle numbers to find that they are currently on aisle three. His eyes fall on the wrench kit in front of him, Peter sees his face fall somewhat, probably embarrassed. He’s 2-0 with Peter in the winning.

“Ah, right. Thanks.” Coupon does his best impression of someone who isn’t annoyed at all by this outcome.

“You’re welcome. Got any... coupons for that?” Peter grins up at him, and Coupon bites down a flash of amusement. Peter thinks he’s missing out, he finds that joke to be delightful.

“Ah-haaa, funny, funny kid.” Coupon wags a finger at him, setting down the wrench kit and leaning on the shelf. “You know, I was just making sure a freshman wasn’t skipping class or whatever.”

“Are you like, a hall monitor or something?”

“No, just a concerned upperclassman.”

“Well, that’s sweet of you, Coupon.”

“Ok, enough of that. My name’s Tim,” Coupon reaches out to shake Peter’s hand. Peter hesitates, but he shakes his hand, trying to stay confident with a firm grip. “Tim Drake. You?”

“Peter.”

Tim tilts his head. “No last name?”

“You know you’re a stranger, right?” Peter replies, and Tim waves his hand dismissively.

“Pffft! You know my name and we go to school together, that makes us friends, not strangers.” He tells Peter, who could argue with the logic if he really wanted to, but it isn’t worth fighting over.

But... problem: Peter doesn’t know what to give.

Like he said earlier in his inner monologue-ing, with Red Hood, he’s been worried this entire time on what last name to give to people, just in case he has a counterpart in this world after all, or if the name goes back to someone. *Peter Benjamin John Andrea Parker* is pretty fucking specific, but it’s not like he’s telling them his full name.

AGH, but Peter Parker could be enough to start looking through names and stuff like that, and if he gave *any* of his names, that’d be it. They’d find him through the real names that he has.

So that leaves him with using a different name, one that can’t be tied back to him. What about Stark? Or Potts? But Peter isn’t really their son and the idea is casted away as soon as he

thinks it, accompanied by a sharp pain in his chest. Peter searches and searches through his mind for a single name, all in a millisecond as he feels time slow down around him.

Think, Peter, think!

“Grayson.” Peter replies.

It’s the first name he could think of. And now he’s stupidly said it, even after saying he wasn’t going to use a name connected to him in any way. ‘Grayson’ was the name his father had before he was adopted and wanted to change it, though Peter doesn’t know why it comes to him now. Something in Tim’s smile falls.

Peter has to commit, otherwise he looks like a liar.

“I’m Peter Grayson.”

“Peter, Grayson...?” Tim repeats, as if it meant something to him. Peter doesn’t have time to ask what that could be about, because he slips back into an easy-going smile. “Well, Peter, what’s a freshman doing at a hardware store on a Friday?”

He looks down at Peter’s basket, which feels personal, so Peter covers it with one arm without thinking. Tim doesn’t let it show if this bothered him or not. “What’s an *upperclassman* doing at a hardware store on a Friday?”

“Just grabbing a new wrench kit, my old one is missing a lot of pieces.” Tim tells him, selecting a kit off of the shelf. “I like taking things apart and putting them back together, but it’s hard if you’re missing some tools to do the job. Your turn.”

“I’m the same,” Peter finds himself feeling relaxed when he doesn’t sense a lie. Tim had opened the kit and looked inside, reaching for the smaller bits to count them out. Someone who has experience with tools would think about that, he thinks. Peter had done the same when picking out his own kits. “I figured I should stop borrowing my landlord’s tools. He’s nice, but he needs his stuff back.”

“What are you making?” Tim glances at his basket again.

“Clocks, radios, that kind of stuff. Sometimes I fix things for people, like fridges.” Peter shrugs, taking his own look at Tim’s items. He had picked out an Allen wrench set, a wire cutter, and a set of micro-controllers. “Whoa, are you making a robot?”

“Huh?” Tim blinks at him, glancing at his tools, and then back at Peter. His lips tug into a sly smile, his voice rising with interest. “Yeah, I am. You knew that based on the tools? Have you ever tried?”

“My dad taught me how to.” Peter bounces on his toes a little, recalling making Little Legs, and when he first met DUM-E in Tony’s lab. Little Legs must know that Peter is referring to it, because it wiggles in his jacket pocket and tickles Peter’s hand. “He has one that helps around his lab, he’s pretty cool to work with, if a little slow. He’s gonna teach me how to make a bigger one next time.”

If you get back.

Shut up.

“Is he an engineer?” Tim’s eyes are gleaming with something Peter can’t name.

“Yeah, uh, he is.” Peter can’t exactly tell Tim that Tony owns a billion-dollar company that doesn’t exist in his universe, but Tony is an engineer. “He knows, like, everything. He’s way smarter than I could ever be, but I can keep up I guess. What are you making?”

Tim has forgotten all about the wrenches. He sets them down in his basket, and Peter recognizes the spark of someone who’s just been asked about his engineering project.

“Something like a roomba, but specifically to annoy my family.”

“What’s it gonna do? Clean up?”

“Oh, no no no, that would annoy Alfred if we tried to replace him with a robot. And it wouldn’t be nearly as good. Nah, I’m thinking I’ll make it to steal shoes around the house.”

He’s caught on the fact that Tim’s family might have a *housekeeper* (what the heck is this guy doing in the Upper East End?) but he forgets it as soon as he hears what it’ll be doing. It’s so specific, that Peter can’t suppress a giggle. “So, are you using wheels, tracks, or legs?”

“We have a lot of stairs around the house, so I scratched wheels off the list even if they were more simple. I’ll probably go for tracks and program it to avoid staircases. For now, I just wanna focus on getting the basics down. Like how it’s gonna pick up the shoes.”

“It could have a scooper.” Peter muses, wondering what he would use if it was him. “Though, the weight distribution would be a problem. Maybe the scooper could put the shoes on its back?”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” Tim blinks. “Jay wears some heavy boots...”

“So you’d have to teach it to recognize what’s too big for it carry.”

“Maybe if-”

“Timmy! There you are!” A girl calls out. Peter and Tim are both surprised by the interruption- Peter on account that he got so wrapped up that he hadn’t sensed her coming. He really has to stop doing that! A girl slings her arms around Tim’s neck, but it’s more like a chokehold than an affectionate gesture. Still, the blonde has a pretty smile as she chokes Tim to death. “You must have forgot we were with you, *silly!*”

“M-Mercy-” Tim pats her elbow.

Peter takes a step back, wary of the newcomer and her strength. Tim’s pale face grows a little red as the girl ignores him, instead smiling at Peter. There’s a boy next to her- Oh, it’s the same guy that Tim had been walking with on the stairs. He’s wearing another really nice winter coat.

“Hi!” The girl holds out one hand for Peter to shake, still locking Tim in the other. Her cheery disposition is rattled by the image of Tim’s almost murder. “I almost didn’t see you there. Are you a friend of Tim’s?”

“Well, that’s what he said, so I guess.” Peter shakes her hand politely. “Nice to meet you.”

“Gu-Guys,” Tim chokes out, and the girl finally lets him go. He breathes a sigh of relief, rubbing at his neck and standing up to shoot a glare in her direction. “Peter, this is Duke and Stephanie.”

“You’re Coupon’s friend from the stairs.” Peter grins at Duke. The other boy’s lips press into a line as tries not to laugh. Tim’s face reddens, shooting a scowl at Peter not uncommon for him to get.

Coupon just makes it so easy, how could he not?

“We’re gonna be good friends.” Duke affirms, patting Peter’s shoulder.

“Steph, Duke, this is *Peter Grayson*.” Tim tells them, and Peter again watches something flicker over their faces at his name.

Did he pick a weird last name or something? Or is Peter missing something?

Stephanie doesn’t hold it long. She instead coos at Peter, “So you must be the freshie that Duke told me about! They didn’t mention how adorable you are. Are you two done here? It’s around lunchtime, and I’m getting hungry.”

Tim nods, looking at his basket and sending Peter a *Just Between Us* kind of smile. Peter is stuck on Stephanie obviously teasing him by calling him ‘adorable’, because her smile is not unlike that of Tony’s when he does the same thing. “I’ve got everything I need. Pete, you hungry?”

“Oh, uh, I mean...” Peter glances outside. It *is* around the time that he needs to eat, but he’s spending the last of his emergency money on this shopping trip and getting some new winter coats. He has enough money to get food if he uses the \$30 he got from helping Benny at the restaurant last night...

Peter sighs shortly. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Great!” Steph takes the basket off of Peter’s arm faster than he thought possible, and she shoves it into Tim’s hands. “You sound like you’re from New York. Are you new here? Have you tried BatBurger yet?”

“B-BatBurger?” Peter stammers. Tim is just as shocked as Peter, but Duke is snickering under his breath. Peter reaches for his basket, but Steph intertwines her arm with Peter’s and starts pulling him to the doors. “Uh, I didn’t check out yet-”

“Timmy can get it.” Steph replies, not missing a step in her sweet voice. Duke follows the pair of them, leaving Tim in the aisle with a doom cloud hanging overhead. He’s gawking at Steph as if she had just stolen Peter from him.

“But, it’s super expensive-”

“He can afford it, don’t worry about that.” Steph opens the door, the bell ringing loud in Peter’s ear as he watches Tim head for the register. Duke gives Peter a *What Can You Do?* shrug that leaves him baffled.

Are all Gotham people just this weird? Is this normal, to kidnap a 14 year old in broad daylight? And what if Tim snoops through his things? There’s nothing seriously incriminating, but what if!? He’s smart enough to figure out what Peter can do with all of that!

And also, Peter doesn’t want to have to pay him back! He has the money *now*, but what if he doesn’t in a few days (or, universe forbid, a few weeks)? Peter hates owing people money or favors!

“If you’ve never tried BatBurger,” Stephanie has no idea to his plight, merely dragging Peter along down the street. “-then you have to get the BatMeal first. Everyone does, so you can see what figure you get.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Stephanie finally looks down at him, giving his arm a playful squeeze. “It’s like Burger King, but it’s themed around Batman and the Robins. You know, Gotham’s very own vigilantes?”

“Oh, them.” Peter nods dumbly. He hadn’t seen a restaurant like that around here, but he also hasn’t been looking out for that during his stay. “So, a uh, BatMeal is like...”

“A kid’s meal. It comes with a little figurine of them, but you don’t get to pick who you get. It’s like one of those mystery game things. People try to collect them.” Duke explains, and Peter’s first thought:

“But they don’t have pictures on the wiki? Seriously? You’re telling me you guys have figurines of them, but *no* pictures.” Peter’s comment causes silence, but he doesn’t notice. “What, did they pose for them?”

“There’s pictures on social media.” Duke reasons as they turn the corner. “No one knows how accurate the figurines are unless they see them all the time or something. They could be all wrong.”

Peter looks over his shoulder, not able to sense Tim. “Shouldn’t we wait for Coupon? I’m starting to feel bad.”

“He knows where the nearest BatBurger is.” Steph waves it off. “And we aren’t too far away- See?”

Peter does see. He sees the weirdest restaurant he’s ever seen in his life. The outside looks like a blue and gray decommissioned Wendy’s- wait, do they have Wendy’s here?- and when they get inside, Peter thinks that he should have lied or ran away by now. It’s sort of weird to

see images of the vigilantes on the wall when they enter, mostly because Peter has met them of them up close.

Though, now that Peter thinks about it...

“Peter, you good?”

Peter looks back at Stephanie. Behind her is a picture of Spoiler in action, a bat shaped boomerang in her hand. Next to it, Red Robin jumping from a building.

“Yeah, I’m good.” He smiles, but internally, his mind is racing.

Tim had looked familiar, but now that he thinks about it, it was more like the *spider-sense* he had gotten was familiar. *Watching* it had said, and Peter can’t help but wonder. Why had it felt the same as to when Peter felt Red Robin watching him from afar? Just more prominent?

Stephanie lets go of his arm, patting his head and telling Duke, “You guys go ahead and sit down, I’ll grab the food.”

“What?” Duke frowns, glancing from the seats to the order station.

worry?

Peter agrees. Duke’s brows are furrowed, and he glances at Steph’s side and back up again at her.

“Let me grab it, Steph. You and Peter can go sit down.” He insists. Stephanie looks like she wants to protest, but she doesn’t get a word in. Duke walks up to the counter instead, already saying hello to the tired man wearing a cheap BatMan mask.

Stephanie sighs, watching Duke’s back with narrowed eyes. Peter doesn’t say anything, instead watching her reaction. She does look tired, because if Peter looks closely, he can see makeup under her eyes, as if covering eye bags. She briefly touches her side as she thinks, finally turning to Peter.

Her eyes widen when she notices Peter watching her, so he smiles politely at her, choosing to play innocent. Stephanie grins, taking his elbow and pulling him towards the booths. “Come on, Duke will get us.”

“I feel bad making them pay for all of this.”

“Don’t, seriously. It’s their duty as upperclassmen to treat the freshies kindly.” Stephanie sits down in a pink booth. Peter sits next to her because she pulls him down to sit there.

Each booth is colored red, green, or pink, and each have a colored window with decorations on it, casting a faint glow over them. The pink booths have pink windows with “HA HA HA” decorated all over them. The green booths have question marks, and the red booths have orange windows with tally marks.

It's an odd choice that Peter doesn't hang onto for long. Instead, Peter asks, "What kind of after school job lets them cover \$190 and then food?"

Stephanie grins, folding her hands over each other on the table and turning to face Peter a little more in the booth. "Their dad pays for everything."

"He must be rich."

"Very."

Peter can't say much about that. Tony paid for everything after taking Peter in- and before then, too. Oh, well, Peter doesn't mind stealing from the rich as much. Whoever their dad is, he can apparently afford to buy Peter his vigilante stuff.

"How old are you? You're so tiny, it's hard to believe you're a freshie." Stephanie has a teasing lilt to her voice, and Peter tries not to let it get to him. Everyone teases about his height.

"I'm 14." Peter tells her, so totally not offended right now. "How old are you?"

"Awww, you're so little! I'm 19- I graduated last year, but Timmy and Duke are still good friends of mine." Stephanie replies, glancing towards the counter. Duke is waiting for the food, and he shoots a peace sign at Steph that she returns with a middle finger.

When she turns back to their table she winces, attempting to play it off as another smile. Only this time, Peter can smell blood. Stephanie pulls her shirt away from her side, but it's too late. Peter can see dots of blood from her side, just under her ribcage.

Sort of in the same place Spoiler was stabbed.

Huh.

Peter doesn't point out the blood, but even if he was going to, he's interrupted. "Steph!"

"Timmy!" Steph leans her cheek on her hand as Tim drops into the booth. He scoots to sit in front of Stephanie, handing Peter his bag from the hardware store. "You took forever to get here. Getting slow in your old age or something?"

"It's not like you ran out on me or something." Tim complains. Peter drags his bag closer to him, checking the inside for everything before setting it down at his side. "What have you been torturing Peter with?"

"Nothing, I've just been educating him on BatBurger!"

"It's his first time coming here," Duke places their trays down, passing Peter a kid box shaped like Batman's mask, and then a proper meal of a cheeseburger and fries. Peter, wanting to get away before Stephanie murdered Tim (they're both making faces like this will become an issue), grabs two empty cups just as Duke does.

“What drink do you want, Stephanie?” Peter asks, snapping Stephanie out of her standoff with Tim. Her eyes soften at Peter.

“Oh, kid, you don’t have to-”

“It’s alright.” Peter smiles. He doesn’t know how badly Stephanie is injured, but it’s enough to bleed and make her tired. She probably shouldn’t be up and about.

Stephanie smiles as if this meant something to her. “A root beer, please.”

“Can I get-”

“Diet Coke, yeah yeah,” Duke waves Tim off. “Drinks are this way, Pete.”

“Everyone hates me.” Time proclaims. Peter chuckles at his dramatics, the older boy putting his head in his hands.

“I don’t hate you, Coupon.” Peter hurries to catch up to Duke before Tim can kill him for the nickname. But based on Stephanie’s laughter, it had the desired effect.

There’s something going on here that Peter isn’t in on, and he has to push down his anxiety about it. Tim and Steph are friendly with each other and there’s no hostility, but they’re still *arguing* about something. He’s able to pick up on it even though they think they’re hiding it well. In Peter’s third foster home, he gained the ability to see this sort of thing. The couple he was staying with were really nice to him, and had a decent sized apartment. Peter was the only kid there, he had his own room, and the teachers at his school were really nice to him. After what happened with his first and second foster homes, Peter craved stability of any kind.

So when the couple started having issues, Peter did what he could to keep it nice in the house. He joked, he played games, diverted their attention. They never outwardly fought in front of Peter, because they were both of the opinion that Peter shouldn’t get dragged into it. He did a pretty good job for a while, mediating their silent arguments.

He’d ramble at the dinner table about his day and they’d ask him questions, never directly talking to each other. His rambling was the only reason dinners weren’t a quiet affair, and they were grateful for it, because they would prompt him to start talking if things went still for too long.

But it didn’t last long. He was only there for two months, and then they broke up. So Peter had to go to his fourth house.

But he learned from that experience. And now he has the ability to eavesdrop on conversations without anyone knowing he is. Peter strains his ears to listen to what Tim and Stephanie are talking about while he and Duke get the drinks. Unfortunately, there’s enough people in the Batburger to make it difficult, the noise mixing together as the volume rises and lowers randomly.

“...*shouldn’t even be here,*” Tim is saying, and Stephanie scoffs.

"I can name at least fifteen hundred times you've done worse."

"That- I mean... not relevant."

Peter misses a bit of the sentence, but he thinks he gets the gist of it.

"I wanted to see him."

"But you ..."

Peter can't hear the rest, and Tim cuts off the conversation as they make their way back. Stephanie pats his arm again as he sits down and hands her the drink. She's very touchy, and Peter doesn't know if it's normal or not to protest this. He hasn't had human contact in a while. ~~*But at least the touch doesn't burn. Stephanie feels safe.*~~

Tim is sipping his drink with a sour pout, glaring at the table as if it had personally offended him.

Are they really mad at each other? Peter glances between the two, wondering what he can say to make them not fight. They are pretty set on acting as if they aren't, which Peter can work with.

He doesn't *have* to, he knows that. But it feels nice to have older kids around, feels like home. When he first went out onto the streets, the other, older homeless kids treated him nice. They always looked out for him, showed him places to hide, where to get food and water, and before he had his chicken coop, he stayed with them and they talked for hours in front of the fire together.

They're safer than adults. Kids, or just teenagers in general, are less likely to hand him over to an adult. Something about teens being against the Man or whatever. It's coded in their DNA.

He still goes to see them when he can, but a lot of them got into good houses because of Tony. The others refused his help, said they wanted to make it on their own. But they're always really happy for Peter. He's sort of missing them right now. Even if Stephanie and Tim are mad at each other, Peter is good at keeping people from fighting.

"Who'd you get?" Duke points to the Batbox with his fry.

Eager to distract, Peter digs into the box and pulls out the figurine at the bottom, unwrapping it from the black plastic. And he laughs at the figure he got, turning it in his hands to show it off.

"Red Hood? That one's rare." Tim raises a brow.

It looks *nothing* like the grumpy older vigilante. Well, it sort of does. It resembles him enough that it's clear who it is. It has his leather jacket and the black suits and pants. But his boots are shorter and brown, the bat symbol more orange than red, and the helmet is so *wonky* that Peter can only imagine it must have melted and then cooled off at some point during shipping.

He was sort of hoping to get this one, deep down. He's spoken to Red Hood more than once, and even knows of a good taco place because of him.

"It would have been cool if you got Spoiler," Stephanie gives a wistful sigh. "She's the best one, in my opinion. Don't you think, Peter?"

"Yeah, in your *opinion*. Everyone knows Nightwing is the best one. He always comes in the best quality and can actually stand up on his own." Tim's comment makes Stephanie roll her eyes. Peter's smile droops a little, a ball of nerves forming in his gut. He can't tell what's teasing and playful and what's got a secret message under it.

"We can order you more and you can tell us your favorite," Stephanie tells Peter, as if it's a secret plan. Tim shakes his head at this, going to protest, but Steph cuts him off. "And you'll see that *Spoiler* is the best one, not the others."

"He'll say *Nightwing* is better, because he *is*." Tim presses. Stephanie uses her hand as a puppet and mocks him.

"Duke, can you go get more?" Stephanie asks him, and Peter can feel the competition rising.

"No, he doesn't need to." Peter urges, and all eyes fall on him. "I like Red Hood."

The competition is gone in seconds. Tim breaks out into a grin so wide it should split his face. Duke's eyebrows raise up as if Peter had said something intriguing, and Stephanie bites down on her own smile, turning away from Peter to collect herself. Peter feels his face heat up, wondering why it's suddenly embarrassing to say out loud. Is it that funny?

"*He's* your favorite?" Tim asks, eagerly leaning forward.

"Y-Yeah, why?"

"Nothing, it's just cute, is all." Stephanie assures him, but all it does is make Peter feel more embarrassed. Cute? He doesn't want to be cute, he's not a little kid. "He doesn't get a lot of fans 'cause everyone thinks he's so... grumpy."

"I think he's cool..." Peter mutters, stuffing the offending Red Hood figure in his pocket. Stephanie giggles into her hand, and Peter's face feels like it might be redder than Red Hood's helmet.

He thinks they noticed he was going to die if they didn't stop laughing at him, because Tim quickly delves into another topic change as Duke gets on his phone, grinning to himself.

"Hey, Peter, you said your dad is an engineer? Where does he work?"

Oh, crap. Maybe Peter should have checked that before he went out and started blabbing about Tony. He didn't think that through at all. What does he say? '*Underground stuff you probably wouldn't know about it?*' He'd sound like some schmuck on social media who thinks he can gate keep Green Day.

"Uh, I don't actually know. He doesn't talk about work with me."

“But he has his own lab, right?” Tim thankfully doesn’t hang on to that little tidbit, and Peter nods. Whew, got out of that. “That’s pretty cool, having someone to teach you all that stuff. Are you in the robotics club?”

“No, I’m not. I don’t have the time.” Peter thinks before answering- because he gets the question so often, it’s only natural to reply with that.

“Busy body, huh? Me too. I wanted to join robotics, but there just wasn’t enough time in the day.” Tim wiggles a fry in the air. “If you get the time, I hear it’s worth it. They go to a competition every year to fight robots.”

“Sick,” Peter sits up in his seat with excitement. He’s *always* wanted to see a robot fight, because who doesn’t want to see a *robot fight*? He and Uncle Ben used to talk about it all the time-

Oh.

A sudden wave of nausea hits Peter. Or maybe it isn’t nausea, but some other emotion that doesn’t have a name.

He doesn’t know if it’s a part of grief or not. He finds that grief comes in waves, but this emotion? It always hits him out of nowhere, with no pull back of the water that he can see coming. It’s less like a wave, and more like an indiscriminate punch to the gut.

Peter suddenly feels small, thinking about the robot fight he and Ben never got to see.
Because of Peter.

“Maybe I’ll go to the competition and see.” He keeps the smile on his face, but his voice is just a little quieter. No one seems to notice.

Focus, Peter. Not right now.

“Is that what you were getting from the hardware store? Robot parts?” Stephanie narrows her eyes at Tim, who slightly pales, a fry hanging from his lip.

“Well, uh-”

“We just started talking about it ‘cause it’s cool.” Peter saves him, because if they ever run into each other again, he wants to see the success of a shoe-stealing robot. Though, has another motive to helping him out. It might be because of that punch to the gut that he just got, but Peter wants to latch onto anything else. Some other goal, that doesn’t hurt as bad, so he can ignore what hurts the most. He chooses to focus on one thing: getting information.

“But what’s *cooler* are alternate dimensions.”

Is it maybe a stupid idea? Possibly.

Will it tell him something he wants to know? Hopefully.

Will it stop him reliving the bad memories? For now.

He's not clueless, even if he does miss a social cue once or twice.

Stephanie is injured in the same spot that Spoiler was stabbed. Not to mention that his spider-sense feels the exact same way as when Red Robin is watching him when Tim is watching him. Then there's Tim's heartbeat- a little erratic, nothing too concerning. Steady enough that it keeps him going, and although healthy, it has that familiar kick to it of someone who doesn't sleep right and lives off of energy drinks or coffee.

He's heard that same heartbeat from Red Robin stalking him for the past few weeks. Enough so that he could pick it out of a crowd if he tried. He thinks this is why his spider-sense felt familiar for Red Robin and Tim both- because they're the same person.

Heartbeats are like voices, if he listens close enough. All unique, even though they can sound the same. Peter knows *why* he pays so much attention to them, but he tells himself that it's because of his safety. He can never be surprised about who's coming near, because he already knows.

Stephanie and Tim are around the same ages as Spoiler and Red Robin, and they know each other pretty well. If they were vigilantes together, then maybe that accounts for why they're close. Plus, Peter can figure that if Red Robin was genuinely *that* curious about him, wouldn't he stalk Peter as a civilian at some point?

But he can't just *say* that. And he can't confirm it, either, not unless he wants to blatantly ask and risk being right or wrong. Both could turn out unwell for him. And they're in public, so that'd be dumb anyway.

What he can do is lay out the groundwork, though.

"Alternate dimensions?" Tim raises a brow, but he muses over the thought. "You believe in those?"

"Don't you?" Peter looks around the room, then back at them. "I think it's kind of neat. There's a dimension right now where I'm older than you guys, or a dimension where Duke is blonde and Stephanie has black hair."

"I mean, I guess they *could* be real." Tim ponders, frowning in thought. There's something behind it that Peter can't name, and Stephanie and Duke are suspiciously focused on their food all of a sudden. "It would be interesting to see. We'd need a particle accelerator to see if test that theory, and I doubt Gotham would sanction that. Batman would throw a fit."

You'd think one would need a particle accelerator. Peter misses when dimensional travel was all just theory to him.

"Isn't the theory about alternate dimensions that they're caused by the decisions we make?" Duke asks, biting into his burger, and then adding, "Like, each one makes a new universe, where you chose something else?"

"Yep." Peter nods. He's eating as he speaks, but trying to force himself to slow down. At every meal he feels like it's going to disappear from his plate, and he'll never eat again.

“There are dimensions where you don’t exist, because your parents never got together. Or because there was a different combination of the gene pool, or whatever.”

“Huh,” Tim taps the table with his fingers, lost in thought. “A Tim-less universe sounds boring.”

“Or glorious, depending on who’s thinking about it.” Stephanie smirks into her food. Tim mocks her, flicking a fry in her direction.

“Or there are dimensions with completely different heroes.” Peter continues, testing the waters. He keeps a close eye on how Tim and Stephanie react- and Duke, too, because isn’t Signal around this guy’s age? “Like, this Batburger could be a restaurant based around some guy called *Antman* instead. AntBurger doesn’t sound as cool, if I’m being honest.”

“I’d *love* to meet a guy called Antman, are you joking? What would his powers be?” Tim uses to fry as antennae, making his voice higher pitched and nasally. “*I’m Antman, surrender or be brought to justice!*”

“What would you do if you met someone from an alternate dimension though?” Peter asks, glancing up from his fries then back down again. “I’d ask a billion questions if I could, I’d wanna know everything that’s different.”

“I’d have a hard time believing them,” Tim says, and Peter resists the urge to frown. “But if they could prove it, then I’d feel the same.”

Peter doesn’t know what he got from that answer. But he’s satisfied with it, he guesses.

He wanted to know, just in case.

He’s all alone in this universe, that he is fully aware of. It isn’t uncommon to how he was before Tony, before the Avengers came into his life. Peter is used to sticking it alone, not really trusting anyone to get close and help him.

That’s what the vigilantes are wanting. They want Peter to have faith in them, and he wants that too. But for Peter, who *always* had to be wary of adults, to suddenly give up control when he could get hurt? It’s his worst nightmare. It literally took Peter *months* before he trusted Tony or Steve or *any* of his mentors to tell them his real name.

But Red Robin, and Spoiler, and Signal?

If these three are who Peter thinks they are, then they’re not *adults*. They’re other teenagers like him, who have been nice to Peter this whole time, and don’t set off alarm bells in his head. Even though the vigilante adults don’t do that, it’s just easier to trust someone closer to his age.

If Tim *is* Red Robin, then Peter would have to really convince him that he’s from an alternate dimension, somehow. Maybe Peter just not existing here is enough, in some way. Or if he has a counterpart somewhere, it could help his case. Though he can imagine there are other

reasons for that happening too. Like Peter just not having an identity, or he's a secret evil twin.

What if they don't believe you?

They could. It's their job, they deal with things like this.

You're just a stupid kid, they just feel bad for you. That's all it is. Just wait until they find out about what you really are, they'll never trust you.

Peter wants to ignore that voice in his head that always tells him this. He's been stuck here as long as he has been because he's avoided getting help. That voice always hisses in his ear to remind him that ~~one time we trusted an adult don't you remember do you really want that to happen again=~~

Peter suddenly feels sick, and sweaty, and like he needs to wash his hands.

This thought feels familiar, doesn't it, Peter?

What if they don't believe him?

Suddenly, this stupid BatBurger restaurant feels too hot and too cold all at the same time. Peter takes a sip of his drink to hide his nerves, the chattering from the other three feeling muffled. They started talking about time travel, and Peter wants to join in.

Because teenagers are safe. They feel safe.

So why does Peter feel so sick right now, and why does he feel so bad about not trusting them? Why does he feel guilty? Feel shame?

you should leave

"What time is it?" Peter squints at the windows, but he can't tell how long they've been there. He feels inclined to listen to the voice, already picking up his things to go. Stephanie's eyes feel like they're glued to his movements, but Peter pretends he can't tell.

She doesn't know.

???

What if she does? Does she see how weird Peter is getting? Peter feels weird. He feels like everyone can read his mind, all of a sudden. He would like to leave, but he also doesn't want to at all.

You don't know these people, why do you feel so-

safe here safe nice warm

trust is dangerous. don't be dumb.

Everything was just fine, why is he freaking out?

It's not his spider-sense that is bothering him. It's not even that these people might be the vigilantes. It's something Peter can't control, and the very idea of that is driving him crazy. He can't control this, he can't stop it, and he wants to be alone.

~~No he doesn't. He wants Tony and Pepper.~~

"Umm..." Duke checks his phone again, smiles at a notification, then replies, "1:20."

Peter doesn't quite meet their eye, but he does manage to keep a smile on his face. He stands up with his trash and his bag. His mouth feels like it's full of cotton, but he manages to say, "I gotta get going. I have work in a few."

"Work? You're 14, who hired you?" Stephanie points out.

worried

Some of the itchy, boiling feeling goes away. Stephanie's gaze is comforting, understanding. The type of understanding where she doesn't say it out loud.

see it?

There's a buzzing in his head that feels unrelated to any of the voices, any of his senses. It quiets when he focuses on them, but...

Peter is tired. Not just physically, but mentally.

He'll have to think about it later. About why he wants to trust them so bad, but when he tries, his voice gets caught in this throat and he can't breathe, and all he can imagine is

~~the last time the last time the last time.~~

"And I'll be late for my shift if I don't skedaddle." He shrugs, waving goodbye to them, walking backwards a couple steps and then turning around to hurry outside. "Nice meeting you guys. Bye Coupon."

Tim groans, Duke snickering at him. As Peter walks out of the restaurant, he can feel more than one pair of eyes on his back.

...watching...

It doesn't feel scary that they are.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand there we go, chapter 4!

As for my last end note a/n, April Fools! If you got Joshed, LMFAOOOOOOO!! But seriously, no more fake links from now on. And also, Jonathan Ohnn is a real, canon character. A few of you figured it out, but yes, this is, in fact, the Spot. He's just MY version of the Spot, and you might see influences of his real personality later. I love all the theories we're seeing, some of y'all have no idea how close you are to being right.

Also, before anyone comments: I DO know that it's called "Wayne Enterprises", not Wayne Industries. I just figured that he'd have a branch that deals with more of the engineering side, like Stark Industries, so there's that. Wayne Enterprises oversees everything.

I just finished writing chapter 6 and booooooy y'all're gonna lose your minds <33 Now i'm off to write Chapter 7!

but can you find me soon, because i'm in my head?

Chapter Summary

"P-Peter Grayson." He cringes because he can't change it now, and he tries not to glance at Dick. His attention is pulled towards the older man anyway.

"Hey, name buddies." Dick smiles at him, setting his phone down.

Peter doesn't reply.

Chapter Notes

hiiii!! I'm back again. Geez, ok, here's the thing- I SOOOO tried not to make this chapter this long. I swear. It just sort of happened. I tried to see if I could split it, but no. So... this chapter is:

24,852 words long. Approximately 1 hour and 39 minutes to read.

"I don't wanna write a chapter that long- but the parasites in me want to write that long! I don't need that long of a chapter, that's unnecessary- but the parasites- the DEMON in me wants to-" /ref

alright, trigger warnings: violence leading to severe injury, math (/j), self harm (NOT through physically hurting, I promise. Peter just makes himself cold on purpose), nightmares that talk of death, grief.

Child abuse (specifically: cigarettes and one adult that has contamination OCD ((please be aware that people with OCD are not abusers, it's just this situation.) It is talked about for only a couple paragraphs. Starting on "Peter hates cigarettes." and ends with "'I don't know.' Peter replies."

Take care of yourself please!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Duuuuke [11:12AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:12AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:12AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:13AM]: @Jay

Jay [11:13AM]: do you want to die.

Jay [11:14AM]: asking because i think you genuinely want me to beat your ass

Duuuuke [11:14AM]: we took peter to batburger

Jay [11:15AM]: fucking and????? why the fuck would i care

Jay [11:15AM]: i was sleeping you assbat

Duuuuke [11:15AM]: he got a red hood figure :)

Jay [11:16AM]: GET TO THE POINT IM FUCKING TIRED

Duuuuke [11:17AM]: we were like “let’s get you more cause red hood is obvi not the best” (it’s Signal, duh) and peter said he doesn’t need another one cause red hood is his favorite!!

Damian [11:17AM]: He clearly doesn’t understand Todd’s history if that is the case.

Duuuuke [11:17AM]: u just mad cause Peter didn’t say Robin

Damian [11:18AM]: I haven’t even met him, so no, I don’t care.

Duuuuke [11:18AM]: sounds like you do

Damian [11:19AM]: For once I agree with Todd. Someone needs to beat your ass.

Duuuuke [11:19AM]: @Bruce get your child he’s threatening my person

Damian 11:20AM[]: Todd is awfully quiet.

Duuuuke [11:21AM]: holy shit u right

Duuuuke [11:21AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:21AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:21AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:121AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:22AM]: WOOOWWWWW @everyone found THE Red Hood's weakness

Damian [11:22AM]: We already knew this information, so maybe get off your highest of horses, Thomas.

Duuuuke [11:23AM]: @Bruce

Damian [11:24AM]: I know you have the intelligence of a five year old but you don't have to tattle like one.

Dicko [11:35AM]: Peter's favrite is WHO?

Dicko [11:35AM]: :((

Dicko [11:35AM]: this is the worst day ever

Duuuuke [11:37AM]: i dunno i think this is fucking great

Duuuuke [11:38AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:38AM]: @Jay

Duuuuke [11:38AM]: @Jay

Jay has left BATCHAT

Duuuuke has added Jay to BATCHAT

Duuuuke [11:39AM]: :)

-

"This is quite ridiculous, child." Loki, who, as Ned learned, is a God or an alien of some kind, rolls his eyes like a petulant teenager.

Ned wonders what would happen if he took up on the advice of the Avengers and *actually* left this part to one of them to handle.

The adults had offered several times to be a go between with him and Loki. It didn't take Ned very long to understand they don't trust this guy as far as they could throw him, and it's not like Loki does much to actually dispute that notion. When confronted by Steve after the first Fake-Peter fiasco, made an illusion of the room looking like the inside of a glacier.

He's heard all the stories that Peter could offer, and then stories that the Avengers themselves offered to him after Tony flipped the fuck out on Loki when he showed up a few days ago. Loki is a trickster, someone who plays for games, who likes a good story. If he came up out of the woodwork, none of them believe it was just to 'help.'

Natasha *is* here for when they think Ned inevitably backs out. Her eyes are as sharp as the knife she is spinning around her fingers, lying in wait for even the slightest slip up from the strange man.

She could definitely take over if Ned wanted. He could throw his hands up and say “*My tummy hurts and I don’t wanna*” and she wouldn’t even judge him for it. She’d give Loki the information he needs for this plan to work out, and figure out what Loki is up to, all without Ned’s interference.

But also, this is the *only* part that Ned can be helpful for, in the search for Peter. He doesn’t have magic, or super strength, or anything like that, so it’s obvious that he will be doing jack-all to help his friend.

Talking? He can *do* talking. He’s strangely good at blabbing away. He’s a professional at this, been training since birth to never shut his mouth. He wants to do this, and he’s not gonna give up just because Loki is difficult to work with.

“No one will be able to tell the difference.” Loki gestures towards the chair next to him and Ned.

But he *really* makes it difficult.

The illusion of Peter is sitting with them, hands flat on the table and watching Ned for the most part. And when he’s not watching Ned, the illusion will look around the room with the same curious glances that Peter has, like he’s lost in thought. When he grins, the illusion has the same dimples that Ned knows. If Tony hadn’t noticed that this was an illusion, Ned might not have noticed for a while.

(That feels so terrible to admit, so Ned only thinks it.)

“Ned, are we done yet? I wanna finish setting up that Avengers Tower set that we got.” Illusion asks, and Ned tries not to let his sour expression show, because that’s definitely what Loki wants. When Illusion says stuff like that, it sounds *far* too much like Peter, and that bothers Ned immensely. Loki knows this.

That’s also a problem that feels icky to Ned.

Because how *does* Loki know so much about Peter and him? Did he check Peter’s room before making up this sick little plan of his? Does he know *all* of the Lego sets they’ve been making together? It’s unsettling to imagine that this man god alien guy knows so much about them, or their personal lives, without anyone *telling* him about it. All because he clearly has something to gain from offering to help them.

(What the hell does he want? Well, it’s not like Ned would know. Evidence: He’s a 14 year old normal human kid that just so happens to be friends with Spider-Man. He is not gonna figure out the whims of the man god alien guy.)

“Can you please *stop* right now?” Ned snaps, his frustration making him sound harsher than he meant it to be.

Loki stares at him for a moment, likely debating blasting Ned into a thousand pieces or leaving him alive. Ned prepares himself to become a nothingness that was once himself when the Illusion Peter clears away, leaving behind an empty seat.

Ned lets out a tiny sigh of relief and takes this as a win. Loki leans forward to rest his elbows on the table, and the god sets his chin on his intertwined fingers, observing Ned much the way a grandmaster would observe a chess piece.

“You do not feel like griping about how I portray the spider?”

“I have a lot of gripes about that, but I’m choosing to focus on the bigger picture.” Ned replies, squinting at Loki. A ball of nerves has bundled its way through Ned, and his body feels like it’s buzzing. *Don’t be stupid don’t be stupid don’t be stupid-* “Which is our school schedule, his personal schedule, and everything you need to know about our classmates.”

“Right, well, I am *sure* you mean well, as all of you human goody-two-shoes buffoons, but I *hardly* imagine that the day-to-day life of a high school human will be difficult for someone of my caliber to manage.” Loki practically hums with amusement.

It’s like Ned can *see* it written on his face: *silly, stupid human child*. It feels like when people laugh at small dogs when they bark at them.

And *ugh*, okay, the that same sentiment coming from adults who know next to nothing about modern schooling is one thing, but it sounded so *obnoxious* coming from this guy’s mouth in the same way it annoys Ned to hear British people talk about American schooling or food.

Yeah, most people assume that a high school kid has nothing on their plates that require the amount of stress that they go through. But most people are forgetting that modern schooling is requiring students to keep up with so many different subjects and extracurricular that the average teenager isn’t getting enough *sleep*. They just assume that everything is just like back when they were going to school, but the standards are *different* now.

And also, they aren’t Peter Parker or Ned Leeds.

“Peter doesn’t *just* go to school and come back home, dude.” Ned contains a rude retort, then attempts to remember his manners. “I mean... sir. Not dude. I definitely didn’t mean ‘dude.’”

Loki might be the jerk that pulled a mean prank on Tony and him, but he’s also a super powerful guy who has killed hundreds of people. It would be bad to get on his nerves.

“That certainly sounds like what he does.” Loki retorts. Ned catches Natasha’s blatantly smug smile that she doesn’t bother hiding behind her cup. Ned takes a deep breath.

“To start with, Peter’s school schedule has a wide load. He missed out on a lot of school before,” Ned’s use of ‘before’ makes Loki’s eyebrows raise and Ned hopes that doesn’t mean anything. “-so he wanted to make the most out of what is offered at Midtown. He tested into a couple junior-year classes and he has several clubs and after school programs that he does.”

“Again, I doubt that I wouldn’t-”

“He tested into AP Calc BC and Ap Chem and he takes those two without me, first thing in the morning. Then he takes Intro to Computer Science, English, World History, Spanish, and P.E. with me.”

“You are in a lot of his classes.” Loki points out.

“Mr. Stark gave a donation to the school.” Ned answers flippantly. The ‘why’ is not important right now, just that they *do* take classes together. “Every day after school we both are in the Academic Decathlon club and Study Group, except Peter goes to BioChem Club on Friday afternoons instead. On Wednesdays after Academic Decathlon, he goes to some of his old hangouts to check on and talk to people he knows. They’ve already noticed he’s not been around these past couple weeks, Biggie caught me on my way home and I told him that Peter was out sick.”

“...Biggie?” Is all Loki seems to have glimmered from that info drop. “The man’s name is Biggie?”

“It’s a nickname, first of all. Second of all, it’s not even that *weird* of a nickname. Third of all, not the point, dude- Sir.”

“Apologies,” Loki says with his hands up in mock surrender, clearly not sorry at all. “I will hand it to you that the spider has a lot more on his plate than I initially thought he would.”

Oh, he’s definitely placating Ned. He’s heard that tone from his teachers before and long distance relatives that he meets once every five years. Ned feels a dig and he really wants to know what Loki would gain from dealing with Ned.

But screw it, it’s another win.

“Yeah, he does, which means you can’t do anything that would mess this up for him.” Ned feels a wave of ill wash over him as he tries to keep up his confident *Don’t Mess With Me* composure that he was advised to have.

This is a guy who gave the Avengers hell not all that long ago. He’s still not trusted, the only one that really holds out hope for him is Thor. Tony and everyone else are quite sure that he’s here to cause them trouble, and Natasha is operating under the idea that Loki is involved in all of this somehow.

Ned truly hopes that isn’t the case. Because that would mean that Loki is an enemy again, and that Peter got caught up in something bigger than he thought. But Ned doesn’t know what Loki would want with Tony’s company- and he’s sure that mostly everyone knows that Pepper has the control over pretty much everything, as the CEO. Loki seems the type to have figured out that much.

It’s a big shot that he’s talking to, and Ned is just some 14 year old dweeb who’s trying not to puke his guts out onto the very expensive table in one of the secure meeting rooms in the Tower.

“If you do anything that would cost Peter later, I’ll make sure you regret it.” Ned tries his best to glare the god down. Because *no one*, not even a god, is going to ruin the life that his best buddy has just been able to get.

Loki’s lips twitch up into a smile that Ned can’t read the intention of. Natasha sets her cup down with a nod at Ned, observing Loki’s reaction out of the corner of her eye. The knife stills in her hand, and the shine from the blade reflects across the table at Loki. Ned gulps, leaning back in his seat under the pressure.

“Is that what you think of me?” Loki asks Ned. “No doubt you heard all from the Avengers that I am a detestable, no good villain. Am I right?”

“I don’t know what to believe. But actions speak louder than intentions.” Ned bites his tongue on accident, winces, and tries to play it off. “I mean, you haven’t really given anyone a reason as to why you’d be generous like this in the first place.”

“I *believe* that I said I came here with the intention to *help*. To offer my much needed assistance with a problem that you all could not handle without me. If I hadn’t shown up, would it not be *Stark* that cost Peter?”

The knife slams into the metal table with a *Screech!* Ned flinches, eyes widening when he sees Natasha stabbed it through to the hilt, like the table was made out of butter.

“Make your point, Loki.” Natasha warns lowly, too calm for the action. Loki clicks his tongue, unfazed.

“I am merely pointing out to the spawn that Stark is the reason that the spider is *in* this mess, is he not?” Loki replies to her, but keeps his eyes on Ned. He lowers his hands onto the table, leaning forward like a snake eyeing a mouse. “I am *helping* with that problem. Why would I ‘mess’ with the spider’s life?”

Natasha replies with a short scoff. “Are we forgetting that you live to make everyone else’s lives more complicated for your own amusement?”

“I am not that selfish. I at least make it just as entertaining for everyone else as well.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Natasha sits up, elbow on the table. Her gaze has hardened, stance set towards Loki and crossing in front of Ned. This stance draws Loki’s attention away from Ned and towards her, and his amusement has pulled back. “We all know that you’re up to something. Don’t think that you can trick us play playing oblivious. You make one wrong move, and your chance to be an ally is stripped away from you. For good. No matter what your brother says.”

“I *highly* doubt it, but I suppose I will ease your worries despite that.” Loki narrows his eyes as he falls back in his chair, swinging an arm over the back. He’s as relaxed about Natasha’s threat as a king on his throne.

“...You’re not gonna do anything?” Ned asks, a hesitant breath rather than a real question.

The man's eyes always hold someone like he knows a secret about them that even they don't know. "I am merely here to watch the story unfold and offer my help."

Ned takes a moment to feel if this is a lie or not. He doesn't believe a word out of the man's mouth, being honest with himself. Not after being told of his history, and actually meeting and talking to him in person.

He rubs his hands together nervously, wondering why they feel like the skin under his palms are buzzing. The anxiety usually settles on his stomach or his chest. Trying to shake the feeling away, he decides that all he *can* do at the moment is trust Loki, but more importantly: trust that if he tries anything, the Avengers will prevent it from getting too far.

Everything is going to be alright. When Peter gets back, he'll see that his life is waiting for him, and Ned will be satisfied to know that he had a role in making that happen.

"Alright, fine." Ned says, and Natasha settles back into her seat. Ned decides to do what he does best: gossip. "Now, I'll have to tell you about our classmates. Starting with the most annoying: Flash Thompson. He's got some kind of academic rivalry with Peter, but I think it's stemming from deep rooted daddy issues--"

-

There is a snake in the garden.

Tony's first lesson on religion had been the reason he never got started with it in the first place, but religious imagery always manages to bring about the exact dramatic vibe that he goes for. There is something poetic about the snake and the Garden of Eden- something tragic, really. Ever since he was a young boy, Tony had sympathized with Eve.

Eve had lived her entire life not knowing of a lie, and God punished her for an ignorance that was his fault to correct. God said that he makes no mistakes, as do his people. But if he does not make mistakes, then what does he call his failures? Is it not left to the parent, the *father*, to teach his children? Or was it because Eve was a woman, she did not count as his child?

Not to say that he *relates* to her story. He just finds it ridiculous that Eve was punished for her father's sins, all because of a snake.

Tony's been told that he has a God complex. But in his mind, he will always be better than God. He can recognize his failures and move past them once and for all, he can be a better man and will always have that choice. He can teach his son, and he will *wring that snake's neck*.

If it isn't obvious, there's this thing that Tony has been *pissed* about, that covers up most of his inward panic and all encompassing fear: This guy that took Peter is a fucking idiot.

(It wouldn't have been better for him if the man had been clever, but it *really* digs into his skin.)

There was a huge, glaring, obvious clue that stuck out right in Tony's face the second time that rat bastard made his way back (for reasons that Tony doesn't know yet, but he *will* find out even if it kills him). Besides the fact that the dimwit keeps crawling back into New York as if *wanting* them to attack him, whenever the moron makes one of those bigger teleportational jumps, he causes a temporary blackout wherever he appears or leaves from.

It's not even *hard* to follow these black outs, either. Tony ended up making a map of the blackouts, down to the exact millisecond that they happen. Through FRIDAY's program, Tony was able to pinpoint a short pattern to his bigger jumps: they happen every three days, approximately. And because Tony is pissed, smart, and impatient, he came up with an algorithm to predict the jumps, along with a city-wide detection device.

What Tony is doing is called "laying down his traps to catch the pest in the garden." It's the best use of his time, rather than listening to that damned Loki speak as if this is all a game. If he stays still too long, he'll start thinking of ways to murder the tricky bitch once and for all.

(There might be *two* snakes in the garden. All Tony knows is that when he saw that fake Peter, one that called him 'Dad' with no hesitation, Tony wanted to grab the nearest sharp object and find out if Loki had a heart by carving his chest open.

Alas, there was a child nearby. Which is the only reason that hadn't ended far more terribly.)

He had kept this from Ned, but by now, Tony has learned the snake's name. They just had to comb through some illegally obtained surveillance videos and the video from Tony's suit, run it through facial recognition- and viola, there they go. He just hates using it, because anything along the lines of 'idiot' is all that he deserves. But it's important for Tony to remember it, to study every detail of how they managed to let this slip through the cracks.

He'd read the file they compiled on this man front to back several times since they got it. He knows as much as he possibly can about 'Dr. Jonathon Ohnn.'

Ohnn had once been a frail, unimportant, background character kind of a man that worked at Alchemax under Doctor Octavius. He wasn't even a villain-of-the-week type that Peter usually has for his villains. He's insignificant, a face and name that is easily forgotten. The research facility is located on a private campus in Hudson Valley, where they research multidimensional travel, among other theories. Tony had only heard of them in passing, as Doctor Octavius hadn't shown his face in public for years.

From what he gathered, everything was going fine for a few years. However, when Tony made his way into their private servers and obtained their files not at all legally, he got to see exactly when Ohnn began exhibiting signs that he was "*unstable and unfit for collaborative work.*"

Octavius had mentioned in said files that Ohnn was "*growing far too secretive with his work and his theories, and growing paranoid that others were trying to steal credit from him.*" He was let go after an incident where he suggested that there was favoritism in the facility, and he broke down in a board meeting. Said details of what happened there were not listed, even though everything else in the file was very meticulously recorded.

It *should* have ended there.

There was an entire year where Ohnn struggled to get a job because of this incident: his reputation was shot dead. No one wanted to work with someone that wasn't going to play as a team- unless, of course, they were brilliant. Charming, in a way. Even though he *was* brilliant, he failed to see the danger, and he had a bit of a temper.

That's how it's been. Until two years ago, when he managed to snag a job at Oscorp.

Tony wishes Peter would talk about the day he was bitten by that spider and how it happened. He wants to find a way to get Peter some sort of retribution for what had happened without selling out that Peter is Spider-Man. But all that he could get out of Peter was that he had gone to visit his father's old work friend, and he was bitten by the spider when he was there.

The work friend had been Dr. Curtis Connors, an expert geneticist like Peter's father had been. The two of them had worked together for years, until one day, Peter's parents took an unexpected trip to a convention in Europe, and they died, along with all of the research that Peter's father, Richard Parker, had.

As far as he can tell, Dr. Connors is still researching cross-species genetics, and hasn't contacted Peter since that day Peter went to visit him.

Now, here's the thing.

If a spider managed to get out and bite Peter, turning him into a spider-mutant, and then Ohnn -who was a regular human two years ago, and whom disappeared off the face of the Earth only two months after Peter himself was bit- resurfaces years later with a snake mutation...

It doesn't leave much to ponder, now does it?

Whether it was a purposeful change or another accident like Peter remains to be seen. But now it's evident that they've all crossed paths before in some way or another.

All things he could have told the kid that's waiting for Peter to come home, but as much as he knows that clarity is key, he doesn't want to involve another kid in this. Ned isn't like Peter- he's a normal kid- no, not like... See, Peter won't ever get the chance to be a *normal*, normal kid, hence why he gets to put on that suit and go gallivanting around to save people.

Ned, however, has nothing- no mutations, no soldier serums, no war suits, no magic. He's a regular damn kid who's something of a little genius like Peter is, and he won't be getting his start in being a hero any time soon, not under Tony's watch.

Tony knows far more than he let Ned in on. They all do. They know Dr. Jonathan Ohnn was given a snake mutation, they know he's a disgraced scientist, they know he is the man that snatched Peter. And they know that everything he worked on in the past is the reason that they couldn't find Peter here.

That's because Peter *isn't* here.

Ohnn's work at Alchemax was a level above the multidimensional travel they were attempting to achieve using the particle accelerator. He was wanting to take their work with the super collider and apply all of that theory into a piece of tech that he could put on his wrist. His damn wrist.

The moron could have gotten his hands on a sling ring and be done with it, but *no*. He *had* to do this the hard way.

And the asshole managed it. He *figured it out*.

Here's the thing about a particle collider: It's not a tech that can just be slapped onto someone's wrist. Take the LHC collider, for example. It's a 27 kilometers long ring of superconducting magnets, and has a number of accelerating structures that boost the energy of the particles. It has two high energy beams that travel at the speed of light, traveling opposite directions in separate beam pipes, then are made to collide. The magnets have to be chilled at -271.3 degrees Celsius. That's colder than outer space. The magnets used are 1232 dipole and 392 quadruple mag.

That's English for "Can't be slapped on a wrist and opening up portals to other dimensions without serious adverse consequences to the body, mind, and the world."

It would be damn impressive if it wasn't for the fact that it had been used to kidnap a literal child and to threaten Tony, his family, and all of his employees and their families across the globe. Tony doesn't know *when* he figured it out, but he has an idea that it happened right before or after his disappearance, when he was bitten by the snake mutation.

Of course Peter gets kidnapped and thrown into an alternate dimension during the time where every magic user that Tony and the others know are busy with their own hell being raised. Of course Loki can't *actually* be helpful and go find Peter and bring him back- of *course* that would end up with Peter fried alive because humans aren't meant to travel dimensions the way Loki is able to.

(This is why he hates magic. The users and the spells themselves never pull through when you need it to. No, you have to *believe* in it for it to give you fucking anything worthwhile. And it's such bullshit. Science? It can't let you down. Every time it fails, that's on the person applying it, they have to figure it out.

Science isn't fickle. It has *rules* and it doesn't rely on feelings.)

But there's another problem- Loki's method could burn a human into nothing. Ohnn's method is much the same.

Ohnn's teleportation and multidimensional jumps are literally burning him alive. That is why Ohnn takes those days in between jumps: his body needs to recover, or he'll remain ash because he ripped his body apart molecule by molecule in an unstable collision. He has the regenerative abilities that Peter does, but it still *hurts* him.

(Peter turned to ash just like that, right in front of his face. It must have hurt. Peter told him it hurt. Tony couldn't do anything about it-)

It *all* just manages to piss him off. To know that Peter is out there somewhere, more than likely captured- No.

No, Tony knows Peter well at this point. Peter is a tricky kid. There's been no evidence to support that they still *have* Peter, and that tracks. Not only had Peter almost managed to get out the first time he had been kidnapped, -

(When Tony got to Peter and that lab, Tony had torn the roof up in order to get to the lower levels faster. When he burst through the rubble, he had found Peter clawing away at his own skin, the metal restraints, and the table itself, almost able to get out.)

-he had also been trained by Natasha to utilize his abilities to get out of their hold. And if that didn't work, he would manage to get out another way. So Peter is probably *homeless* again, unless he got lucky and ended up in a universe where someone is able to take care of him. He's all alone, trying to get back home, trying to survive. Like he had been before they found him.

This wouldn't have happened if Tony had been faster. Or if Tony had been prepared for someone coming up with an idea like this. Or if Ohnn hadn't...

No, Tony can't place the blame on him alone.

Ohnn did *not* come up with this idea.

The cracked scientist was described as 'irrational' more times of his life than he was described as a genius. And on the day of his disappearance, witnesses claimed that he was talking to the air around him as if someone else was there. From the camera footage and from the mandatory therapy notes that Tony got his hands on, everything points to Ohnn not having the mindset to create a plan like this on his own.

The thing is, the man isn't focused at all on Tony. Tony himself has never met him (Tony also looked into seeing if he indirectly or directly screwed this guy's life up somehow, but there was nothing), and instead of making a beeline for Stark Industries or trying to confront them directly, he slips away and find somewhere to hide.

There's also the fact that Ohnn *hadn't been in this dimension when the ransom demand was sent to Tony*.

Tony had followed that message all too easily, tracking it down to being sent from a computer in a storage unit not that far away from where Peter grew up with Ben and May. When Tony got there and they forced the unit open, it had been empty. Empty, save for a fold out chair and a note that said "Better luck next time." in a printed out font.

(He remembers throwing the chair against the wall and Rhodey forcing him to sit down. But nothing else until he was home, sitting on his bed, and Pepper was resting her head on his shoulder as they both stared out the window.)

Someone is behind Ohnn, pulling the strings, and they are far more capable of sound reasoning that the man who has a lightning quick temper. Who is it, and what do they want

with Stark Industries?

Tony knows that there are a *lot* of reasons to want the company and access to it, but he specifically needs to know what this person wants. It'll tell Tony what he needs to destroy, so that no one can get their hands on it. It might even lead him back to the person that wants Stark Industries in the first place- there's plenty of people that have been wronged in Tony's past by Tony himself, seeking revenge. Depending on the branch, it might even be someone Tony employed.

It's a question he needs answered, and this simpleton is *going* to give him that answer.

Tony knows it's going to happen, there's no doubt about it. Teleportation doesn't stand a chance against the *simple laws of physics*.

"All set, Capsicle?" Tony tries for a light jaunt, but all he can feel under his skin is a burning anticipation and rage. It thrums with his pulse, every breath he takes rising up with an eagerness to burn someone down to dust.

"Would appreciate if you dropped the 'sicle' already, but yeah. I'm ready." Cap huffs in his comms. Rogers is a block over, keeping his overtly polite eye on that area, like he had been for the last fifteen minutes as they prepared for Ohnn's arrival. The algorithm ticks down on the timer in the corner of Tony's eye, taunting him and making the itch to fight worse.

Tony had *wanted* to do this part himself. However, he was saddled with a babysitter, one that everyone was sure would stop him if Tony took things "too far" with the man that they have to interrogate once they get their hands on him.

As *if* Tony would let this blockhead die on him before he forced the man to spill his cowardly guts about where he took Tony's kid. He'll have plenty of time to talk about what the big plan is, because Tony is going to make sure that they drag it all out. He wants to know every single detail that this nimrod has, and Tony will repay the favor with his own 45 step plan on reducing him to nothing but ash that *stays* that way- ash, forgotten in the wind.

"I'll drop the scicle when your backstory changes." Tony replies shortly. "FRIDAY, what are you reading?"

"I scanned the atmospheric radius of the approximated zone of arrival. Readings indicate there is an abnormal electromagnetic fluctuation within the vicinity, Boss. However, there is a peculiar quantum signature emanating from the center of the radius."

Tony clicks his teeth, crouching down on the ledge of the rooftop. New York blinks back up at him, and Tony has to admit that all he can think about is the way Peter would describe it.

"So he's about here, then." Tony huffs as he reads his screen. There's quantum entanglement patterns that suggest a disruption in space-time. It's disappointing that they hadn't known to detect something like this until it was too late, but Tony is incredibly prepared now to make up for the mistake.

"You're sure you've got this?" Cap tries. Tony's almost forgets to pay attention to him, too busy watching the timer counting down to Ohnn's arrival.

2:18, 2:17, 2:16..

"What are you trying to say?"

"Don't start with that." Cap huffs. *"I'm just saying that you're gonna need your head in the game-"*

"Don't start quoting fucking High School Musical at me, Rogers. I'm not the one getting distracted here. Don't talk and keep an eye out for the bastard at the same time, it's improper manners."

"First of all, I didn't mean to quote High School Musical."

"Sounded like you did."

"Second of all, I'm not saying you're distracted. I'm saying that this is pretty emotional, and when you get emotional-"

"When I get emotional? Are we forgetting who got so heated during Uno?"

"That game creates monsters, and you're trying to throw me off."

"What? I would never." Tony sits up straighter. 1:47, 1:46...

"You're twisting my words around, too. I'm not saying that this is something you do, specifically, nor am I saying that-"

"Blah blah blah blah blah, Rogers, do you ever stop trying to get on my nerves?"

"Do you ever want to actually face your problems?"

"No, I'd prefer to pay it off or punch it."

Steve lets out a weary sigh of a man that is much older than he actually is. *"Tony, be real for five seconds."*

"Or you could shut up and focus." 1:26, 1:25

"I am focused. I'm trying to get Peter back too, Tony. You're not doing this alone, and you're not the only one that cares about him."

"Excuse me?" Tony stands up even though Steve can't see him from a block over. "Last I checked, you're not the one that's on his paperwork, his legal guardian-"

"I train with him-"

"A teacher!"

“But I also show up to his science fair and I see him nearly every day, when we’re not out doing missions.” Steve presses on. *“That’s what I’m trying to say, Tony. I get that you see him as your son, but I see him as a nephew.”*

“Don’t imply you’re like a brother to me.” Tony tries to sound offended, but it comes out more like he’s been strangled underwater.

“I implied I’m like a brother to Potts. Figures you’d assume that it’s all about you.” Steve replies, but there’s little bite to it. Tony shakes his head, disturbed that the man actually made a funny comment. It’s the worst when that happens.

54, 53...

“Got less than a minute.” Tony interrupts the banter.

“You swear you’re good?”

“Yeah, whatever. You act like I’d do something stupid when Peter is on the line.”

“Not what I meant.”

44, 43... 39, 38...

They fall into silence as the seconds tick down. FRIDAY is the only one who speaks, stating, *“Detecting inter-dimensional wavelengths, Boss. He’s approaching fast. Adjusting time limit.”*

The clock jumps from 32 seconds to 20. Tony flexes his fist, crouching low into a runner’s stance and bracing his feet against the wall. His screen centers a target around the empty street below, the suit blasters whirring to life. Thank Whatever that it’s nearing 1AM in a quieter neighborhood.

“10 seconds.” FRIDAY informs him.

9, 8... 5, 4, 3-

The streets lights flicker on and off, one of them bursting. The shattered glass falls to the street below as the entire street goes dark, including inside the buildings. There’s a humming in the air, and built up pressure that makes alerts go off in Tony’s suit.

2, 1.

As soon as Ohnn appears in a flash of white and orange light, Tony is on him.

He jumps down from the sky and a laser beam strikes the air where Ohnn just was. Ohnn had slithered backwards in a flash, hitting his back on a dumpster. When Tony lands on the ground, Ohnn’s tech teleports him behind Tony and out into the street, screeching out:

“You gotta be quicker than that!”

“Smart mouthing me isn’t going to be *nearly* as fun as you think it is.” Tony flies up higher, shooting down at Ohnn with the high energy unibeam from his chest. Ohnn twists around to avoid it, and Tony manages to corral him towards-

Steve drops down behind Ohnn on top of a car, the thud so loud that it dents the hood and the car alarms ring out. Someone screeches from a balcony that that’s their car, but Steve ignores and bull rushes towards Ohnn.

The snake reacts too quickly. He drops down onto the ground and strikes at Steve’s legs, rolling forwards when Steve jumps to avoid the strike. Tony lands in front of him, but Steve swings back with a kick to Ohnn’s head.

The snake grunts, his head snapping to the side awkwardly. He spins around and drops to the ground. Tony reaches down and grabs the snake’s head, flying upwards as the snake-

“Oh, god, that is disgusting-”

His arms wrap naturally around Tony’s arm, attempting to bend Tony’s arm backwards and the elbow. Tony throws him against a brick wall, scraping his face alongside the brick. Blood smears on the wall and when Ohnn’s grip lessens, Tony pulls back.

Ohnn’s mouth is a bloody mess, the flesh of his cheek and eyebrow pulled backwards. Tony slams his head again, and again, and again-

“*Tony, stop!*”

He freezes for a moment, hissing when Ohnn cackles in his face. The blood dribbles down his chin and he reaches out with his claws at Tony’s neck, trying to bend the metal with his grip. For a moment, he considers not stopping, but this *waste of life* is the only real way Tony could get the answers he needs. Infuriated, Tony kicks him down, the snake grappling to catch himself on a balcony. Tony yanks him off when he almost gets to the top, and he hits the concrete next to Steve.

“I thought you said you could handle this!”

“He’s alive, isn’t he? That’s more than enough. For now.” Tony lands on the ground next to him.

Ohnn groans, his arm bent in the wrong way at the shoulder. He’s shaking, and for a blissful second, Tony thinks he’s giving up. But the snake turns his head backwards, too inhuman, to look at them over his shoulder.

“Funny, isn’ i’?” Ohnn slurs, wiping his mouth with one hand. The blood doesn’t stop pouring down his chin and neck, a mottled mess from the brick. “You star’ payin’ attention when the Parkers’ brat goes missin’.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean, huh?” Tony steps forward, fisting Ohnn’s collar and dragging him up. Ohnn’s face is still split into a smile. “What was all this for? Who are you working for?”

“I tried to tell everyone before,” Ohnn grabs at Tony’s wrist, a maniacal gleam in his eyes. “I was *right*. But no one wanted to listen. Well, now you’re listening. *Now* you see me. Us.”

“Who are you working for?” Tony repeats. Steve touches his shoulder, pulling him back from Ohnn. When the snake hits the ground, Steve presses his foot down on the man’s chest to keep him down.

“Calm down, Tony.” Steve’s words do nothing to actually calm him down, and the enraged monster in him rears its head.

“Don’t tell me to *calm down*-”

The lights turn back on in the street.

Or at least, that’s what they thought happened, at first.

However, the light only increases, and when Tony looks up, the street lamps, the buildings—they’re all falling away. Steve shields his eyes from the light as FRIDAY darkens Tony’s visor. Underneath Steve’s foot, Ohnn’s image slips into nothing but smoke, and Steve’s foot hits the white ground.

“What the hell is going on?” Tony turns in a circle. FRIDAY’s voice is muffled in his ear, glitching out and skipping like a broken record. *D-D-D-Don’t- Panic- B-Boss-Boss-Boss-*

Just as fast as the white light had surrounded them, the light disappears. They’re back in the street, and when Tony looks around for who might have caused this—

Ohnn is *gone*.

There’s a puddle of his blood on the sidewalk, but no sign of the man nearby.

That had to have been an illusion— Ohnn had turned into smoke, much like— that fake Peter had, when Loki had shown up. Tony seethes, barely able to hold back his anger as Steve rubs his eyes free of the light. “FRIDAY, scan the area right now. Where did he take off? Is there someone else nearby?”

“Scans indicate that no new life forms entered the area, and only Ohnn left.”

“So he’s still around, then—”

“However,” FRIDAY continues. “There had been unidentified drones deployed above. They had approached and attacked quick enough to disable my ability to talk to you, then created that light. Ohnn was able to escape.”

“Drones?” Tony echoes. That... That is unexpected.

If that was an illusion, wouldn’t that have been from Loki? He’s the only one Tony knows of nearby that could do magic like that. But if it wasn’t magic, but rather technology... It does line up with the fact that someone had sent the ransom over a secure line. Sure, Tony had

hacked it eventually, but they had been smart enough to send the code not from their own base, but from that storage unit.

Loki isn't tech reliant, he prefers to cast his own magic. But then, who had been in control of those drones?

"Where did the drones take off to?"

"They cloaked and exited range. I was unable to track them down, but I was able to pick up the direction where they had come from: Oscorp Tower in the Manhattan area."

"Isn't Oscorp somehow involved in how Ohnn and Peter both got their abilities?" Steve is blinking hard- the light must have been brighter than Tony had been able to see, considering he had a darkened visor.

"It is. That's also where Dr. Connors worked." Tony's jaw clenches. "He knew Peter's father and he worked with Ohnn for a while. FRIDAY, scan Capsicle here for injuries."

"Temporary eye strain from the light. He needs to rest his eyes for a little while and he'll be right as rain." FRIDAY replies.

"Good. Now call Natasha and let her know to cut off Ned and Loki. Loki is running an errand for us. He wants to be useful, then we're going to let him be."

-

Peter made the mistake of trying to sleep.

It wasn't a bad dream. Not really.

He thought it would be a good idea to clear his mind and get some rest before his patrol that night. His mind was being fucking stupid and his body was too, acting like it couldn't tell the difference between being chased by a starving bear and having fun eating somewhere with new (friends?) acquaintances. So he laid on his bed and stared at the ceiling with the lights off, watching as afternoon sunk into evening. And he recalled a memory he hadn't thought about in a long time.

When he was five years old, he had been laying on the rug in the Parker's living room, his hand raised in the air and watching the fan blades spin around. The sunlight from the window would dance with each turn, and he could hear Aunt May giggling. The soft fuzz of music from the kitchen and the smell of dinner made Peter sit up on his elbows, smiling when he saw Uncle Ben dancing with her.

Sometimes they would have their own little world, just the two of them. Peter could look in as an outside observer, seeing the precious moments like this. Dancing, singing, laughing, all of it so full of love that Peter equated it to watching a movie.

This time, however, Peter's chest had hurt so badly.

He knew he was happy. He knew that Uncle Ben and Aunt May were happy.

So why was he also sad?

Being sad would confuse him, would make his head feel fuzzy, disconnected from the world around him. He sat there and watched them in their own little world, and wondered what their life would be like if Peter hadn't been pushed into it.

Oh. Peter had thought, watching Ben spin May, forgetting about stirring the noodles in the pot, and the two of them panicking when it boiled over. But May was laughing, because she's always such a lively person.

His chest hurt because he felt guilty.

Peter didn't remember much about his parents. They were gone often enough that Uncle Ben and Aunt May would take care of him for months at a time, sometimes. But Peter would always sit at the window and wait for them to pick him up when they got back.

And Peter thinks of the last time they returned, the last day he spent with them, and everything was fuzzy. He knows his dad had picked him up and lifted him into the air, had kissed his cheek and Peter had laughed and laughed and laughed. He knew his mom read him bed time stories, and she would do silly voices.

But not their faces. Not the stories they would tell, not what the silly voices sounded like. When Peter tried really hard to think about it, he'd just see something fuzzy.

Guilt hit him hard. He's so happy with Uncle Ben and Aunt May, that he can't remember his parents.

And then he's guilty, because he parents would leave him here and in Ben and May's world. They never asked for him, but they took care of him. So why had he been sitting by the window, waiting for these strangers to come home?

He's guilty because he's sad. He's sad because he's happy. It all just goes round and round, like the ceiling fan.

That was the last thought he had before he fell asleep, and that's where his mistake bit him in the ass. Because he dreamed about Ben and May, he dreamed about his first foster family. He dreamed about Neri.

The names and faces swam in Peter's mind, an amalgamation of memories that didn't make sense. In the first dream, Peter and Ben were riding a boat, the cold wind in Peter's hair and making their noses and ears grow red. But they were smiling so wide, facing the wind and watching the skyline pass by. The sky was orange and red and so colorful Peter didn't want to look away.

But he did. He turned to tell Ben that this was such a good day, and he's so happy that they got to go together. But then Peter remembered that this had never happened.

"What's wrong, bud?" Ben cupped his cheek, his smile fading. *"It's your birthday, you aren't supposed to frown."*

Peter couldn't ask. He didn't want to know how Ben was at his 11th birthday with him like they planned to be, because he had died when Peter was 10. The Ben that's in front of him has no bullet holes in his chest, and Peter isn't hiding under his coat, trying to stop the blood.

"Ben, where do you go when you die?"

Ben had never been religious, he thinks. They never went to church of anything, but he wouldn't stop Peter from finding religion, if he wanted to.

"I don't know, Pete. Where do you think?"

"With you." Peter replied. *"Where you went."*

Peter awoke feeling wrong. Ben's face kept appearing as he laid back down, tugging the covers off. He felt sweaty.

The second dream was the parade. The balloons were flying high up in the sky, and Peter was so excited for the Captain America balloon to get close enough. May squeezed his hand tighter when someone bumped into them, tugging him close. Peter, for some reason, could hear her heartbeat.

It kept getting louder and louder, and faster and faster, and- *"What's wrong, May?"*

"Nothing, bubah," May said, and Peter couldn't feel her hand. *"We're almost to the fair, are you excited?"*

"Is Ben coming?"

"Right after he's done with work."

That's not right. Peter knows that Ben was away.

"May, are you gonna die?"

This conversation was not on that day. This was at a science fair, when he was 7 years old. Peter's peers all had their parents present, all of them together. And Peter couldn't tell what to feel. Sad? Happy? Guilty?

Sad his parents aren't there?

Happy that Aunt May and Uncle Ben are?

Guilty that he doesn't feel sad?

This May, however, is at the parade. And they're almost to the fair, like Peter and she were supposed to go to before Peter got lost. Before May had her heart attack, and before it was just Peter and Ben, and the little world Ben and May had together was lost.

"Bubah, where is this coming from?" May says, and Peter mouths the words as she tells him, *"I'm not going to leave you, Peter. Are you feeling fuzzy again? It's okay if you're not feeling*

well, I'll help you feel all better, just like last time, remember?"

Peter shook his head. *"I just miss you."*

May looks sad. Peter's eyes sting with tears. *"I know."*

Peter woke up that time feeling like he needed his inhaler. But he knows he didn't need his inhaler anymore. He closed his eyes again, desperate for the dreams to go away. They didn't.

His third dream was of his first foster family. Peter had spent a month at a group house, and he had grown quiet. He wanted to talk, he really did. But sometimes his mouth just wouldn't open, and he didn't know what to do to make it stop. His therapist tried her best, told him that it's okay to be overwhelmed.

Peter had wanted to argue. *This isn't the first time. I should be used to this now.*

But that thought had struck him with so much guilt, he couldn't breathe.

He was sitting at dinner with his first foster family, feeling the brunt of one of those days. The grief that took his voice, that made his whole body ache and his eyes feel hot, and him feel small. He kept poking at his dinner, but the nagging voice in his head is reminding him that the dinner table is wrong. It's not the real one he remembers. In the dream, this table looks like the one from his third foster home.

Chandler tapped the table to get Peter's attention.

The couple that took him in, Karen and Devon, had their own son. He was 16, and Peter is 10, but Chandler was really nice to him despite the age difference. Peter thought he was being nice because he knew what happened to Ben.

He points his middle and ring finger towards his chest and moves them up, then makes a claw with his right hand and touches his left fist. Peter, who had only been here for a month, has no idea what this means. He doesn't know much ASL, unlike their family, who had been learning since Chandler lost his hearing.

Chandler isn't mad that Peter doesn't know. He taps the table for Karen's attention, and Karen shows Peter what he means.

"Feeling fuzzy?" Karen repeats the action, teaching Peter how to make the signs.

Fuzzy. He doesn't know if everyone even *understands* what he means when he tells them that's what he's feeling. But they never question him about it.

~~May and Ben did that too.~~

Peter nodded his head. Chandler raised his hands again, signing something else Peter doesn't know yet. Karen teaches Peter what each one means, her voice is soft and her hands are gentle.

"Do you want watch Star Wars?"

Chandler laughs when Peter sits up straighter, and he already knows the answer.

Peter opens his mouth to reply, but they're no longer sitting at their dinner table, but walking down the streets of New York. Peter is holding Karen's hand, wondering why they wanted to foster to adopt *him* of all kids. He holds on tight to her hand, desperate not to let go this time. Karen doesn't mind if it hurts.

~~The sky gets dark, and Peter holds onto her hand even when the debris falls through the sky and hits them.~~

He jolted out of his sleep with that dream, tossing and turning. The evening is now night, but Peter is not rested. They aren't *bad* dreams. He thinks. He doesn't know why he feels like scratching at his skin.

Wanting to try just one more time, Peter lays back down.

Peter hates cigarettes. At his 7th foster house, it always smells like cigarettes. He goes to school covered in the smell, so much so that his teachers keep accusing him of smoking in the bathroom. They only stopped when Peter started crying and told them he was sorry, really sorry, but he couldn't wash his clothes to get the smell out because they weren't allowed to use his foster father's laundry room.

At his 8th foster house- where Peter wears long sleeves to cover up the burn scars on his arm that made his social worker move him and Neri- doesn't smell like cigarettes, but disinfectant. All the time.

Neri and Peter sit on the porch, locked out of the house again. She came from the 7th foster house to this one *with* Peter, which doesn't happen all that often. He thinks. He's still only 11, and been in the system for a year. Neri wouldn't be able to tell him if it's normal or not, because she's only 7 years old.

He doesn't know much about her, or where she comes from. She sounds like Brooklyn, but she doesn't want to talk about it, so Peter doesn't bring it up. He thinks it's because of what happened at their last house, because Neri likes Peter so much that she doesn't fight the social workers when he's there, that they get to stay together.

"Do you know where we go when we die?"

Neri's abrupt question startles Peter. He could have sworn this conversation happened right before she was pulled to another house, and Peter never saw her in person again until her funeral. Right now, she's supposed to ask when they'd be allowed back inside, and Peter would say, *"When Miss Una says we're clean."*

"I don't know." Peter replies, folding his hands and watching the sun sink in the sky. He's back in Queens for the first time all year, and that's his only comfort right now. *"Where do you think we go?"*

"With mommy." Neri says, picking at the paint on the porch. *"Peter, do you miss your mommy and daddy?"*

Peter wishes his eyes would water. But they don't. His parents had been strangers, and he doesn't have anything left to remember their faces. That was destroyed in the Battle of Manhattan. And Peter won't have access to Ben and May's storage unit until he's 18.

"Sometimes." He says, and he doesn't know if it's a lie or not. *"I miss a lot of people."*

"My mommy was really pretty." Neri tells him, and it's like it's a secret. *"I think she was an angel, before she died."*

"I think so too."

"You do?"

"Well, where else would you get it from?" Peter pokes her side, and Neri giggles. She leans into Peter's side, so he wraps his arm around her.

"Will you miss me?"

Peter looks down at her. She feels cold underneath his hand. *"What do you mean?"*

"You said you miss a lot of people. When I die, will you miss me?"

Peter didn't stay in bed after that. He woke up feeling like everything was too close to him, sweating buckets but feeling cold as if he had a fever. He jumped out of the sheets and across the hall to the bathroom, stumbling in the dark when he turned on the shower. He didn't bother with the lights.

-

Nightwing didn't know he was heading to the Upper East Side until he was there.

Sometimes he has the audacity to zone out, on the slow nights or the bad ones. He gets there at about 10PM, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders. It isn't like he hasn't handled stress before. Universe knows that he's gone through more than he ever should have and that it's a miracle he is even somewhat sane.

However, recently, the stress has been hitting him harder than he'd like to admit.

He's finding it difficult to get to sleep when he finally gets the chance to. Going back and forth from Gotham to Bludhaven is taking its toll on him, but... someone else is bothering him.

He'll end up tossing and turning over in his bed, kicking the sheets off of him in a desperate attempt to get comfortable somehow. And he starts wondering if he should check under the mattress for peas, because what *else* could be keeping him awake like this?

No peas are hidden under his mattress, so he can scratch off a fairy tale being the reason he's up all night. A pea *is* bothering him, but it's the mental kind. A feeling that is just out of

reach, hounding his every waking thought and screaming at him to get up when he tries to rest. The moment he sets his head on his pillow, he knows that five minutes later he will be sitting upright, that bite of anxiety herding him wherever it wants to.

What? He wants to yell at his own mind. *What am I missing?*

Because that's just it, he *has* to be missing something! It's the same kind of itch that he gets when he can't solve a case, the kind that makes him pace around his room at ungodly hours of the night.

Is it Two-Face? Firefly? Both of the villains are still out there in Gotham, biding their time before their next strike. Obviously it bothers him that they're out there, that's literally what he is *here* in Gotham for. But their cases haven't felt any more unusual than they always are. Villains getting out of Arkham? Shiver his damn timbers, or whatever.

Which leads him to think: *Is it Spiderman?*

He's gone from just a rumor the city is passing around to an actual, real person. A short, *clearly* young kid kind of person, but yes. Not a rumor.

In fact, he's a very strong and fast, *talented* person that they need to keep an eye on. However, he isn't the only vigilante to start working in Gotham outside of Batman's team. He's likely going to go down the same route as the rest of them, because Bruce's rule hasn't gone out the window just for Spiderman. If they don't get the kid talking and on *their* side, then he's gonna have to go.

And they're sort of rooting for him to stay, even if only a couple of them have said it out loud. When Cass had sent that video, it had been their first time actually *seeing* SpiderMan, except, well, for Nightwing. But he had just seen Spiderman for the first time minutes before that. And in a short time, Spiderman has gotten Bruce's attention, as well as Damian's.

Hell, even Tim has been rattling on about the webs that Spiderman uses, and Cass sent a thumbs up for him. Stephanie and Duke are of the impression that it would be cool to have another meta on the team, and Jason hasn't said anything on what he thinks. All Nightwing knows is that he's an impressive kid, probably trained from an even younger age than he is now. That accounts to how easy it is for him to get a villain like Ohnn on defense.

Nightwing was impressed too, but more-so because of the person he met, not the video. The kid is witty, and he saved Nightwing before he went splat on the concrete, so he finds it hard to imagine himself wanting to kick the kid out of Gotham. In fact, it'd be nice to have him around.

And yet, Nightwing doesn't think that's the case for the sleepless nights. Or it might be part of it. It isn't until he finds himself looking down at a familiar figure sitting on a roof that he thinks he knows *why* he can't sleep at night.

It's the Elusive Peter, out for a night of city-watching again.

The kid isn't sitting on a ledge again, which gives Nightwing some peace of mind. Despite the fact that it's nearing the end of October, he doesn't have a jacket on, only wearing a long sleeve night shirt, plaid pajama bottoms, and socks. He's holding his knees and leaning back on a wall of a storage closet on top of the apartment building that he's been living in, over the Benny's restaurant.

Nightwing hangs back for a moment, peering down at the kid. He doesn't have any new injuries, and in fact, looks bruise free. But it has been a while since Dick saw him, and hasn't just heard from the others what he's been up to.

What he lacks in bruises, he makes up for in red and puffy eyes, like he's been crying. Peter...

Peter looks more tired than a kid should ever feel.

It's not the kind of tired where it can be cured with a good night's rest. It's a tired that he himself knows *all* too well, like looking in a reflection of himself. Maybe this is what Bruce had meant when he told Dick that he saw his own past in Dick, when he had just lost his parents.

Sitting in the silence of the rooftops like this, Peter looks small. The kid always looks small for his age, but that isn't what he means. It's like the kid is trying to make himself blend right in to the backdrop of the city.

And that... That won't do.

Nightwing's feet carry him towards the roof that Peter is on, thinking that this has to be the reason why he decided to go on patrol on a night that he was supposed to get some sleep. It's been Peter, the whole time. Thinking about this poor kid who's become a pawn in the adults' business, who won't ask for their help unless they meddle, *that's* what he can't stand.

"Kid, aren't you cold? It's like, 35 degrees out. You're gonna get sick."

He doesn't know why that's his opening. Their last conversation had gotten somewhat unpleasant, because Nightwing ended up pushing too soon. This time, he wants it to go right. He wants to gain Peter's trust, so Peter will let them help him *properly*.

Peter looks away from the city lights, rubbing his hands over shivering arms. He gives Nightwing a shaky smile. This close, Nightwing can tell he was right that Peter had been crying. His eyes and nose are red and puffy, there are bags under his eyes. He's lost weight since Nightwing last saw him. (Not okay, not at all, because Peter was malnourished *before* and it's only getting worse.)

He doesn't look surprised to see Nightwing.

"Oh hey, Mom, you're back."

There it is, the easy going nature that the kid has. Nightwing grins as he sits down next to Peter- not too close, because Peter tenses up when he thinks that's what is about to happen.

“Haha, very funny.” There are droplets of water dripping from the wavy curls on Peter’s head to his shoulders. As if he had just bolted right out of the shower and came up here, without a thought to himself. Nightwing tries not to show the strike of worry that eats at him, instead reaching out to ruffle Peter’s hair.

Thankfully, the kid allows the contact without looking ready to run. He doesn’t move at all, though. It’s like he’s frozen to the spot. Nightwing pulls back his hand, and doesn’t miss the way the kid’s shoulders relax, but his eyes track the movement of Nightwing’s hand, as if not wanting him to stop. Mixed signals on this front... he wants the contact but is afraid of it, maybe.

“Why are you out here with your hair wet?” Nightwing can’t hold it back any longer. There’s no one else looking after the kid, and even if Peter hates him for it, he’s gonna have to bring it up. “You’re *really* gonna get sick that way.”

“I don’t get sick. I have an indomitable immune system, my doctor said so.” Peter replies casually, but it’s moot when Nightwing can see him shivering and hear his teeth chattering.

“They did, huh...?”

“You sound skeptical, but I assure you, I only ever have to go for my yearly visit and my vaccination shots.” Peter snuffles, and squints when he realizes this doesn’t help his case. Nightwing leans a little closer to Peter’s side because he has a heating system in his suit.

“So you’re testing your limits?”

“Just... felt like getting out of my room.” If Peter notices what Nightwing is doing, he doesn’t point it out. He doesn’t lean away, but he doesn’t lean closer, either. Just... stuck.

“Kid...”

“I’m being safe.” Peter doesn’t quite get what Nightwing is worried about. “I know you guys know where I live, and we are *literally* on the roof of that building right now. I took the fire escape and there aren’t any hardened criminals on top of the burger joint.”

As if the kid’s only concern is whether or not he gets shot. Nightwing briefly considers if kidnapping Peter to the Wayne Manor is a reliable option. The others would back him up, but they would disapprove of the method. Batman could shut his damn mouth about it- he should have taken the opportunity those few nights ago to at least bring it up to Peter when he managed to get the kid in the Batmobile.

“You could at least bring a jacket with you. Your immune system can only bring you so far.” Nightwing points out.

“I’ve been out here for *two* minutes.”

This kid... Nightwing internally shakes his head. He has a feeling he should pick and choose his battles... or... he could fight this one, in a sneaky, underhanded way. It’s for Peter’s benefit, so he can forgive himself for it.

“Well... seen anything worth watching yet?”

Peter releases a short breath, looking at Nightwing for a heartbeat, searching his face. The kid is always trying to read him, trying to figure him out with those clever eyes. Even when he met Peter as himself, Peter had been wary, had searched Dick's face as if searching for a reason to run.

He must find something there, because Peter has the faintest smile.

“I watched two rats fight over a hot dog down there. Not really a new sight, though.”

“That happen a lot in Queens?” Nightwing grins back.

Peter chuckles, raising his voice to regal Nightwing with a tale. “The rats *own* the city. They have a rat king in the sewers who's at war with the crocodiles.”

“Sounds harrowing, I shudder to think of it.” Nightwing pretends to shudder, in the process, getting just a bit closer to Peter, so he can feel the heat from the suit. “You ever met this rat king?”

“No, not yet. It's on my bucket list though.”

“So, what else is different from Queens? Besides, you know, the obvious.”

Peter considers his words for a moment, then says, “The noise is different.”

“You mean... city noise?”

And Peter, for the first time, offers up information about himself first. Without Nightwing having to ask. “Yeah. It's like... I dunno. Just different enough that it's hard to sleep sometimes. It sounds stupid...”

“No, it doesn't.” Nightwing is quick to swipe that thought away, hoping Peter would get that he could tell Nightwing anything, and he won't think it's stupid. Actually, it's Nightwing who says something stupid. He talks about himself. “I get that. My family and I use to travel all the time when I was a kid, and the cities used to sound different.”

He pauses, wondering why that had slipped out so easily. He doesn't talk about *him* when he's Nightwing. He always draws that line, between vigilante and civilian, for his safety, for his health.

However, he thinks Peter really needs someone to get it.

“You ever been to the countryside?”

Peter shakes his head, all of his attention turned on Nightwing rather than the city. And when he speaks, Nightwing can still feel sweet country air on his skin, hot and humid. He can taste the honeysuckle one of the older kids showed him, the flower they'd snack on after a show. He can even hear the wind in the trees, followed by the memory of his mother's voice.

“It’s nothing like here, like the big cities. Depending on where you are, they have these bugs, they’re called cicadas. They make noise *all* night long, talking to crickets and frogs outside your window. And let me tell you, it is *way* harder to sleep when you can only hear a frog in your ear. I’d prefer the cars honking and the cussing, sometimes, because *man* can those things yell.”

Peter laughs- a real, actual laugh, maybe picturing a frog like Dick is. He has dimples in his cheeks, and he only shivers when the wind passes by. Dick shields Peter from it, sitting up just enough to block it.

“I’m being *serious*, kid, they’re awful!” He insists, laughing with Peter, because the kid’s laugh is contagious. “They were out to get me, and me personally. All night long, just a yappin’ outside my window, and they only got to stay because they ate the crickets, which were even *louder*.”

“*Yappin’*? What are you, eighty years old?” Peter snorts, and Dick gasps in mock offense.

“I’m seventy, young man, and not a day older.”

“I’ll let you think that, ‘cause I’m so nice.”

“Maybe I’ll have to put some frogs outside *your* window and see how *you* describe it.” Dick says, and Peter is shaking his head. Unfortunately, the air grows silent for a few heartbeats, leaving Dick to wonder what else to talk about. He got Peter laughing, so maybe he should keep talking about frogs?

Is that what kids like these days? Dick actually doesn’t know. His most recent experience with a teenager this young is Damian, and the kid usually only laughs when one of them falls or he proves them wrong about something.

Dick is quiet too long (it’s only been a couple seconds), because when he opens his mouth to tell Peter about a time he fell into a lake (this will surely get him to laugh more), he’s struck by how quickly Peter’s smile has turned sad.

The kid is trying to maintain it, trying not to shrink in on himself. Dick inwardly panics, wondering if his silence had startled Peter back to the start. Then, he catches the way Peter’s brows furrow, and he has a hard time meeting Dick’s eyes.

“...It’s been a while since I last saw you around here.” Peter breaks the quiet first.

That certainly wasn’t what Dick was expecting. Had he actually noticed Dick doesn’t patrol around here, but rather in other districts? Or is it because he’s only seen Red Hood around these parts since their first encounter?

“Yeah... I’m back and forth between places right now. There’s a lot going on.”

Which is the truth, but it suddenly feels like an excuse. He just doesn’t know how to tell Peter that he *wishes* he could visit every day to check on him. But he can’t, not with everything going on. Not with Two-Face, Firefly, and Ohnn out there.

“Right...” Peter chews on the inside of his cheek, his legs getting closer to his chest as if to get smaller. He now looks at his hands, playing with his fingers. “Um... I spoke to Mr. Red Hood...”

“*Mister* Red Hood? You know, you can just call him Red Hood, right?”

“My aunt and uncle taught me to be a polite young man, thank you very much.”

Dick laughs, earning a chuckle out of Peter. It’s more subdued than before.

This can only be about one thing. Ohnn still hasn’t been caught, and Peter has been spending his time inside. Dick can imagine the toll it must be taking on him, being all alone save for the restaurant owner and his customers. He can’t even go to school, can’t meet new friends to help him feel like a kid rather than a hostage.

If this was Dick, he would have already asked a million questions by now about how their investigation is going- hell, he would have started investigating himself, like Peter must have been doing when he tailed Ohnn that day. It’s a no-brainer that the kid wants to get back to his life that he had before things went to shit.

And another image strikes Dick, makes his blood run cold, recalling what Jason described about Peter’s injuries. Had he met Ohnn again? But no, they would have known. He isn’t injured.

But he *had* been injured. He’s got to be terrified that it will happen again.

“Is this about that man, Ohnn? Is everything okay? Red Hood told us about it, you know we’re looking for him, right? We *won’t* let him hurt you.”

Peter’s brows furrow as Nightwing speaks, and before he can even finish, Peter is shaking his head. “No, no, I’m not scared, or anything.” Peter glances up at Nightwing’s face, and then away just as fast. “I was... I mean, I apologized to Mister Red Hood, but I didn’t get to apologize to you.”

What???

“Me? What for?”

“I kinda snapped at you, that wasn’t cool of me.” Peter’s words feel like a punch to the guts. It hurts to see how he struggles to get the words out properly, stuttering to phrase it the right way. “Sometimes I get... I dunno, I get angry out of nowhere sometimes, and I don’t like when that happens. I’m sorry.”

Peter won’t look at him.

Something about that bothers him. That Peter is picking at his nails, that he’s gone back to feeling tense. That he won’t meet Dick’s eye, and his face is twisted with guilt.

“I’m not mad at you, kid.” Dick’s voice comes out even softer than he meant it, as if they’re sharing a secret. “Did you think I was mad at you?”

“I dunno.” Peter shrugs, his voice catching.

He did.

Peter doesn’t have to say it. He can’t hide how he’s feeling, the kid wears his emotions on his sleeve. Especially not after a night where he’s obviously been crying. And briefly, Dick wonders with a heavy heart if Peter came out into the cold with his hair wet not because he was just a kid who thought it wouldn’t matter, but because he was punishing himself.

“Red Hood told us about Tony, too, you know.” Dick says slowly, and Peter finally looks back up at him. The kid is waiting for the other shoe to drop, mistrust gleaming in his eyes. “I heard you care about him a lot, and it’s obvious at that time that you did. Peter, I’d be upset if someone thought that someone I cared about had hurt me.”

There it is again. Disbelief, like he hadn’t thought Dick would reply this way.

“It’s just-” Peter is contemplative, conflicted. He bites his cheek, looking around them for the words. He grows frustrated with himself, and it’s almost like he’s forcing the words out of his mouth.

“...I don’t- I don’t...” Peter says, and Dick almost tells him he doesn’t have to say anything, if only to get the kid to feel more comfortable, but Peter plows through. “I don’t trust easy.”

Dick falls silent.

Peter is choosing his words carefully. *He* is the one making this first step, not Dick. And if that’s what he wants, Dick isn’t going to do anything but listen.

“But Tony, you know, he like... He put in *so* much effort for that. Just for me.” When Peter says ‘me’, his voice cracks, and he looks so distraught that Dick wants to hug him. “And I wasn’t his foster kid, then, either. I was just some random kid, but he still did that. So I just... He’s a good guy.”

He speaks as if the notion that Tony, let alone *anyone*, putting that kind of effort into him is a fantasy concept.

How could anyone ever let this happen to him?

He’s so young, so new to the world and yet he knows far too much. His eyes are like that of Jason’s, of Tim’s, of Stephanie, Duke, and Damian. His eyes are like Dick’s, when he looked in the mirror. Knew too much, too fast, and was robbed of the childhood he should have had.

It’s *cruel*. It’s mean, and so twisted, and the older he gets, the more kids he sees with those eyes, the more it feels like the world has never been fair. Dick’s chest pangs with grief thinking about it- thinking about Peter, and what could have made him think this way.

He wants to scoop Peter up and take him home. Give him a decent, proper meal, and a warm bed, and a house where he doesn’t have to look over his shoulder every day. Not when he’d be surrounded by people who would never let anyone hurt him again.

But Peter doesn't trust easily. He can't ask Peter to do this, not when he knows Peter would run away from him like he does everyone that tries to get close.

If this is the case, then Dick will put in the effort. He'll make sure that Peter can never doubt his trust, just like how he never doubts Tony. In order to get, someone has to give. And he thinks he knows how to do this. By going one step at a time.

"Do you want to start over?"

Peter scrunches up his face in confusion, tilting his head at Dick, because this seemingly has nothing to do with what Peter just told him. It's adorable, even if Peter still has his walls up around Nightwing. "I mean, let's introduce ourselves. We've never done that."

The kid raises a brow at him.

"But didn't Mister Red Hood tell you my name?"

"Yeah, but I'm still meeting you." Dick holds his hand out to Peter, and rather than faking a cheery, over the top voice, he leans back on the wall and hopes it comes across as important. That Nightwing cares about him, wants to get to know him.

"Hey, I'm Nightwing, it's nice to meet you."

Peter stares at his hand for a long time, his mouth open as if the words are caught in his throat. But eventually, his gaze flickers up towards Dick's face, and *there*.

There it is.

A glimmer of hope, beneath the defenses he'd built up. A sparkle in his eyes that Dick is so, so grateful for, because it means Peter really was reaching out just now. Peter smiles smally, a hesitant thing, but no less warm. He reaches out and grabs Dick's hand, his hands so cold.

"Nice to meet you Mister Nightwing. I'm Peter Grayson."

...

...Huh??????

Dick pauses, his smile almost faltering.

"Grayson?"

Grayson!?

See now, Dick has not gotten a chance to talk to the others in a couple of days, because the students have their mid-term exams, Jason is off doing what he wants, and Bruce has been all in on sniffing out where Two-Face and Firefly are. He's been in Bludhaven, but he *does* know that Tim had said he 'learned something interesting' when he met Peter as himself.

This *had* to be it, and why those three teenagers had giggled when they brought it up briefly.

Those little shits...

It caught Dick off guard, but... it's not like it's truly a *unique* last name. *Plenty* of people have it that aren't related to Dick, and Peter is one of them. Just... it's weird, hearing this kid use his last name at all. That's it, right?

That's all there is to it?

Wait, is this... *actually* Peter's last name? He *had* just met Dick Grayson two weeks ago, and Peter strikes Dick as the type to avoid using his real name, even if he's trying to trust someone.

Peter makes a face at him, and in a voice that says this isn't the first time this has bothered him, asks, "Is that an uncommon name here? Or is there a villain with that last name? Everyone I introduce myself to does that whole repeaty thing."

Dick struggles for an explanation. He doesn't want to make the kid think that he thinks Peter is lying about his last name, but it had truly caught him off guard. He clears his throat, and he doesn't have to force out a smile because he laughs awkwardly.

"It's just, uh, that Bruce Wayne's oldest son has that last name."

"That's the old guy that's on, like, *every* billboard in the city, right?"

At this, the awkward laughter turns into real laughter. Oh, man, he had thought that their family calling Bruce 'old' had been just a joke at this point still- but now kids who aren't even related to him use that as his first descriptor? He'll have to tell everyone later, after chewing them out for not warning him about Peter's last name.

"Yeah, that's him." Dick, hoping this doesn't come out as fishing for information, asks, "So, who do you get your name from?"

Peter grins again, relaxing into the wall behind them. "My dad."

"Tony? Wait, sorry, that's your..."

"Foster father." Peter reminds him gently. There's a soft look on his face as he speaks now, more vulnerable than he had shown Dick so far. "My mom and dad died when I was little."

There are many ways to become a foster kid, so he hadn't wanted to guess. But it does hurt that Peter experienced loss and grief when he was that little.

Peter squints at his knees.

“Hey, when I look up, you better not have the ‘pity the poor orphan’ face on.”

Dick huffs, shaking his head at the idea. “No, no, it’s not that face. I used to get that face too. I hated it.”

Which is correct. Dick had never despised anything more than when someone would give him that look, as if he was broken. Maybe because he didn’t believe he was, because he’s still alive and was doing something to process it. Maybe because it was a reminder that he *was* broken.

Peter is gently surprised, but he seems... appreciative that Dick would tell him that. He breathes a sigh of relief, and for the first time, he leans closer to Nightwing’s shoulder.

“It’s a terrible face.”

“Absolutely frustrating.” Dick says, and Peter grins, still looking at his hands on his knees. Dick prays he isn’t pushing his luck when he speaks, keeping his voice low. Almost low enough that Peter could choose to pretend he never heard it. “But what about your aunt and uncle?”

Peter had mentioned it earlier. If he had living relatives, then wouldn’t he have stayed with them, instead of going into foster care? The kid’s grin drops again, and he shrugs shortly.

“They both died a few years later, so I went into foster care.”

It isn’t fair.

But why would Dick tell him that? Peter knows it isn’t fair, and Dick knows it isn’t fair. There’s no use stomping it into the ground, and Dick refuses to be one of the people who can only say ‘sorry.’ He gets it, he doesn’t blame those people. But what good can come out of Dick’s past right now, other than being able to speak to Peter the way he wished someone would speak to him?

“What do you and Tony like to do?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, you two have like, a thing you two do together, right? My dad and I do puzzles together sometimes, it’s our thing we do.” Dick fails to mention the other thing, called fighting crime in spandex and Kevlar, but Peter doesn’t need to know that. “So what is it? Roller coasters? Baking? Shoplifting?” Dick guesses the last one with a fake semi-serious tone, and Peter shakes his head and laughs. “If it’s shoplifting, I’m not a snitch.”

“We don’t do any of those things. I think Tony would burn the house down if he tried to bake anything ever again.”

“So, what do you do?”

Peter hesitates, but he relents, and Dick gets to learn yet another thing about this mysterious Tony- and Peter. He hates that he’s filing away the information, that he’s going to tell the

others about some of it. But this is the most that Peter has said about himself and Tony in ever.

But what he does note is the sparkle in Peter's eye as he talks about Tony, and how the dark shadows on his face disappear. In this moment, he's a kid who wants to talk about his dad. Maybe pretend that everything is normal, having a moment where the world isn't trying to screw him over.

"Tony, uh, he's a mechanical engineer. Not just *a* mechanical engineer, he's the best in the world. Uh, in my- in my opinion." Peter stammers at the end, grimacing as though he shouldn't have said that. He fiddles with his hands as if building something in the air. "He makes robots, and planes, and, uh, all that stuff. We spend hours in the lab every day after school, and Pepper always has to drag us out of there 'cause we forget that we have to eat and sleep sometimes. But it's just- it's so much fun, because he's *brilliant*, and he teaches me everything he knows about engineering. We started building a bot together before all of this happened, and I really wish I could show you, 'cause it's super smart and tells funny jokes. We call them HAFI, cause Tony likes acronyms."

This might be the most Peter has said to him in one sitting. Peter had been cracking jokes, but overall he's a quiet kid, waiting for someone else to fill in the silence if he can. But apparently when you get the ball rolling, Peter can ramble. Dick can't suppress his triumphant grin, that Peter doesn't notice because he's too busy talking.

"It stands for 'Humorous Autonomous Friendly Intelligence' but honestly, we named it like that because it sounds like 'Happy', which is Tony's friend's nickname. He looks and acts like a grump but he's really not, 'cause a grump wouldn't go to birthday parties and wear stupid hats if he didn't like you."

He thought that Peter didn't know too much about Tony's work, but from what it sounds like, he and Peter work together a lot. If Peter is in this lab all the time after school, he's bound to know more than he's letting on.

(Then again, when Peter said this, he was new to town, had just been beaten up, and wasn't trusting anyone.)

Tony is an engineer and it sounds like he gets work, if what Peter is describing is true. So he's bound to at least have a name somewhere in the engineering world. There's also two new names in the mix that might make it easier to find him and ask what the hell Ohnn is doing. Pepper must live with them, but Happy is just a friend. A nickname could go a long way if it isn't just a personal nickname that Tony gave the guy.

"So you're telling me that you can build *robots*? Dude!" Dick nudges Peter's side with his elbow, and Peter attempts to hold back a shy smile. "You didn't tell me you were a *genius*, kid, I would have tried to sound smarter."

"I can't build one on my own, I'm not that smart. I'm not as good as him." Peter deflects, his face growing red. He doesn't get compliments often, Dick guesses. Well, that's gonna change tonight.

“But you can still *build* one, and that’s so frickin’ *cool*. Give yourself some credit, Peter.” Dick gently taps Peter’s shoulder with the back of his hand. They’re sitting close enough that Peter is no longer shivering from the cold and is instead shoulder to shoulder with Dick. Peter hugs his knees, almost leaning into him. “What other talents is Peter Grayson hiding?”

Peter gives a shaky laugh, tucking his fingers into the long sleeves of his shirt. The kid’s face pales, his ears getting redder and turning away from Dick. He must really not be used to talking about himself, because now he’s getting shy.

“What do you mean? I’m just Peter.”

“Any other hobbies? Like, music? Writing? Sports? What does Just-Peter do when he’s not building robots in his spare time?”

Peter gains some color back into his face, really thinking about it. He pouts his bottom lip as he searches for something, the silence stretching for a little longer than Dick expected. Oh, man, maybe he shouldn’t have asked? It’s not like the kid has much to do, considering he’s being hunted down by a madman.

“...I know some gymnastics.”

First, he’s relieved it wasn’t a bad question. Then, his interest is piqued ten times over. He blinks down at Peter, a smile slipping onto his face.

“Really?”

Peter is a small kid, doesn’t look very athletic, but maybe it’s because he wears baggy clothes all the time. It’s hard to tell if he has the muscle strength for it, but- well, this is good for Nightwing’s secret plan on getting Peter warmed up and tired enough to go to bed.

And really, if there’s one thing Dick can talk about, it’s gymnastics.

“Yeah. My, uh, dad was in gymnastics before he died.” Peter is suddenly very interested in his shoes. “But I couldn’t afford classes, so I never got too into it.”

“*Too* into it?”

Peter catches the tone in Dick’s voice and pries his gaze away from his very interesting, beat up converse to squint at him.

“You’re making a face like you-”

“I’m going first.”

Nightwing jumps to his feet, patting Peter’s knee as he does. Peter’s jaw drops, gawking at Nightwing as if he just said he could do real magic. Nightwing claps his hands together, and he turns himself upside down to stand on his hands.

He gives Peter a wide grin. “Can you do this?”

“I- I’m not warmed up. And it’s cold outside-”

“It’s okay if you can’t.”

“-What?”

“I mean, a handstand is hard. I get it. Maybe we can try something else.”

“I can *do* a handstand. *Anyone* can figure out a handstand.”

Nightwing raises a brow as Peter scoffs, getting to his feet, and files away for later that this trick somehow worked. It usually does. It worked on Jason, worked on Tim, worked on Damian- hell, it’s worked on Bruce a couple times.

And to his credit, Peter is in a handstand with little effort. He doesn’t even flinch at the tiny rocks on the roof, and even walks with his hands over to face Nightwing.

“All right, so you can do a handstand.” Nightwing sees Peter’s crooked grin. “But can you do a cartwheel?”

Nightwing is about to do one, but Peter beats him to it. It’s an effortless glide as he spins, landing once again on his handstand. Nightwing falls out of his handstand to crouch in front of Peter, pointing a finger at the kid’s playful smirk.

“I thought you said you didn’t know much about it.”

“I know enough.” Peter manages to shrug upside down.

“‘Enough’, you say. Alright, little punk, so how much *do* you know?”

Peter snickers, “Try me.”

“Round off.”

Peter lowers himself out of the handstand, jumping back to his feet pretty quick. Nightwing almost comments that he should be mindful of the blood rushing to his head, but Peter isn’t even phased. His face isn’t even red from hanging upside down.

He stretches his arms as though to do a cartwheel, adding a hurdle in the air. It’s *great* form, actually, and he is convinced Peter was downplaying how interested he was in gymnastics. Peter lands on his feet as if he’s done this trick millions of times.

...He clearly knows more than he let on.

“Front Walkover.”

Easy work, but he knew that.

“Back extension roll.”

Peter is smiling freely, more relaxed than Nightwing has seen him ever. If he's bothered by the cold, he doesn't let it show. He just shows off, even demanding that Nightwing has to do the same.

Handstand Pirouettes, front handspring, back handspring, an aerial cartwheel, front tuck, back tuck- Peter knows it all. When Dick is in Gotham, he runs a gymnastics class for the younger students, for beginners, so he knows the difference between a beginner and someone who has months of practice under their belt. Peter is the latter.

When Peter lands on his feet again after a back layout- which is certainly not for a beginner who's never taken a class- Nightwing can't contain himself. He claps Peter on the back, feeling sort of *proud* of Peter. Never taken a class, but he managed to do all of this?

"How did you learn this?" Nightwing asks. Peter's face is a little red from running around, his hair is mostly dry and windswept, and he's seemed to have forgotten the awkward air from before. He's suddenly a different kid than the small one Nightwing had seen just 40 minutes ago.

"YouTube, mostly." Peter explains, rubbing his hands together. There are little marks on his hands from rocks, and Nightwing almost winces. He shouldn't have let Peter do this on top of a roof, now that he thinks about it. "But my grandparents had videos of their routines, so I used to watch that."

"All of this from ViewTube, just videos?" Nightwing almost can't believe it, but he does.

It's almost instinct, to just reach out and ruffle Peter's hair. He does it all the time to his brothers, so it isn't until he's already doing it that he realizes Peter might not appreciate it. But Peter doesn't slap his hand away, and actually *leans* into his hand this time, suppressing a goofy smile.

And *man*, that was adorable.

"This is *seriously* impressive, kiddo. You're really talented, I'm almost jealous." Nightwing would add a thousand more compliments, if only to keep Peter smiling. He practically beams under the praise, like a plant seeing the sun.

But, unfortunately, all time comes to an end. Nightwing hears a crackle of his comm- they must have realized he was out, now, and they're going to hound him at any second to get back to bed. Nightwing fixes Peter's hair with a sigh.

"It's getting pretty late, Pete. Sorry, but I have to get back."

Peter nods, maybe expecting that, but he doesn't look unhappy. "Yeah, I figured. Thanks, Mister Nightwing."

"What for? And just call me Nightwing."

He's quiet for a moment, contemplative once again.

"I was having a bad night." He says softly. "I missed my dad."

-

He must have been delirious. He *must* have been, because why else would he have told Nightwing all of that? Why else did he act like a baby that needed cheering up?

The second Nightwing is gone, it all crashes down on Peter like he had been holding the sky, like a moron. He groans into his hand, the embarrassment radiating off of him. Foolish, *childish*, stupid, is what that was. How could he have acted like that?

Peter never should have come up to the roof in the first place.

After all of those dreams back to back- where they felt like nightmares, but could have been dreams- Peter had dunked himself in the cold water of the shower, barely got dressed, and climbed up to the roof. He swore it was because he needed to see the city lights and clear his head. *No other reason.*

(But if it was no other reason, then why didn't Peter grab a jacket? Why didn't he dry his hair first? Why did he let himself sit in the cold, feeling the sting in his fingers and the sharp pain in his lungs as it stuck to him?)

He was angry with himself, is why. He knows his body isn't good with the cold, and he did it anyway. On purpose. To feel something? Or was he just that angry at himself, that he wanted to feel the hurt?)

It was those nightmares- dreams- whatever he calls them. They're the reason that Peter just started blabbing about himself to Nightwing, a stranger, practically. What was he thinking? He hadn't even trusted Tim, Duke, or Stephanie- the *teenagers* that he swears are more trustworthy than adults. He hadn't told them much about himself, had avoided the topic altogether.

But Nightwing was right there, minutes before Peter would have calmed himself down and gotten over it. And he tried looking for reasons not to tell him anything, tried to convince himself it was a bad idea. But the voice inside his head was quiet, for once. And his spider-sense only kept telling him:

'safe. gentle. worried.'

It just... It felt like Tony, in a way. Not exactly, but close enough. And he started to feel guilty that he was so closed off from someone who was trying.

Worried, he had been told by his spider-sense. He cared if Peter was going to get sick. He was *trying* to make Peter laugh, and he talked about himself just to ease Peter. And ease, he did- it was so *easy* to talk to Nightwing, like they're old friends. So Peter had to apologize.

He had been snippy with Nightwing, after all, and Peter- maybe he only apologized because he wanted to see his reaction. (No, because Peter genuinely felt bad for snapping at him.) He expected Nightwing to be upset, but his first reaction...

"I'm not mad at you, kid. Did you think I was mad at you?"

As if it had *never* crossed his mind to be upset with Peter. And Peter is so used to adults being angry at him, for not listening, for not understanding. The Avengers were the first adults in a long, long time that knew Peter as himself and never got angry with him. The idea never crossed their minds.

Why does he care so much? Why do they all care so much?

Peter reminds himself that they're heroes. That he of all people should know why they care so much. He also sits on rooftops and talks to civilians, he sits with kids who are having bad days and listens to them too. He cares, he cares *so much* that it hurts, sometimes.

He wasn't mad. And even if he doesn't actually believe that Tony is a nice guy, he reassured Peter anyway. Because he knows it matters.

And man, when he told Peter they were in the same boat? That he had also lost his parents?

Maybe that was what did it. Peter is regretting opening his mouth, but also not. Because for the first time in weeks, he talked to someone who didn't get mad that he rambles, that didn't set off alarm bells that he shouldn't get close to them. Spider-sense or otherwise. And his chest feels warm, and he keeps thinking about Nightwing ruffling his hair.

"Moron." Peter sits down on the roof. He had promised Nightwing that he was going to get to bed, but really he's waiting until he knows Nightwing is far enough away that no one will notice him slipping out into the night as Spider-Man.

"He's just being nice."

Because in reality, that's what it is. Peter can't equate him to Tony, because even Tony...

Peter might think of Tony as a dad, but he's still just Peter's teacher. A mentor, more than anything else.

Sure, Tony goes to all of his academic decathlon meets, helps him write his essays, and they sneak around to get fast food on days where they just really want a burger and are avoiding going to business meetings. But as much as Peter likes having Tony as his foster-dad, he still recognizes that he can't call Tony 'dad' to his face. Because if Peter wasn't Spider-Man, there would have been no reason for Tony to take him in as his foster-kid.

At most, he would have had an internship at Stark Industries, but been put back into the system with someone else. (Tony certified, because he knows that Tony would never let him stay with a bad foster parent. Never again.)

Nightwing isn't his foster-dad. He isn't even Peter's teacher. He's just a vigilante who sees Peter as a victim. Peter can't get attached, because... Because he'll go home, when all of this is over. And Nightwing won't think twice about him again, because he'll have other kids in Gotham to worry about.

Still, though. Peter looks at his hands, and how the divots from the rocks have disappeared. He had still felt a surge of pride and admiration when Nightwing complimented him. The

same he gets from his mentors. From Tony and Pepper.

There's the echo of his dreams, whispering underneath the aftermath of Nightwing's leaving. All the people he's lost...

His tiny anxiety attack at that stupid Batburger place had been triggered by Peter starting to trust someone who was being nice to him. He hadn't had one in a long, long time, so it felt worse than it should have. He just- He was thinking about-

Westcott.

Peter rubs at his eyes, taking a cooling breath. It's been two days since then, but Peter still feels the effect if he thinks too long about it. His mind must have conjured up his family members in order to remind him of the good, but all it had done was remind him of the events that led to Peter running away that December.

Ben and May... His first foster-family, that wanted to adopt him should everything go right... and Neri. Neri, his foster-sister, that he cared about so much, because she was such a sweet kid who deserved the world. All of them had-

And Peter couldn't save them.

He really had been missing Tony, just as he told Nightwing. Tony isn't a stranger to these types of dreams. Dreams where they remember the people they couldn't save, dreams where they wake up feeling like a ton of bricks had fallen on top of them. Dreams that make them get up, get *out* of their rooms, and search for anything to distract and clear their minds.

Instead of finding Tony sitting in the living room, or heading down to the lab... Instead of seeing Tony's face soften when he spotted Peter, where Tony would smooth his hair or pat his shoulder, and whisper, "*Let's go to the lab, bambino.*" Instead of that, he had met a cold and empty night, in a strange universe he doesn't belong to.

Nightwing isn't Tony, but he really helped. And Peter hopes he doesn't come to regret his half-sleepy, half-post-breakdown decision to talk. His therapist would be proud of him.

Peter forces back the pinprick of tears. *No more crying.*

He didn't even know he still had it in him. But apparently he does. He just- He misses his people so much right now. He'd give anything to see just one of them, even if it's just on a phone screen or whatever.

"Stop being a baby." Peter growls at himself, blinking back the tears.

"Is this a bad time?"

"Yes." Peter bites. Then freezes, feeling that pinprick at the back of his neck that someone was there. He hadn't been paying attention again. Peter's eyes widen and he whips around- not because of his spider-sense whispering to him-

we know! hey we know! here here here

-but because he recognized the voice. Peter's jaw drops at the sight of the man behind him, standing on the rooftop in a proper black winter trench coat, a nice green tie, and his black hair pulled back out of his face. The sharp features that match his dignified voice and attire, contrasting his usual tricky personality.

Peter's voice is caught in his throat. He's sure he must be dreaming.

"Mister Loki?"

Loki has his nose scrunched with distaste, observing the roof and the city around them as one would observe a fishing warehouse. He doesn't look at Peter as he talks, instead pacing closer while scoffing at a billboard that lays out what to do in each case of a villain breaking out of Arkham. "Out of *all* of the universes you could have been brought to, that fool picked a rather disturbing one, did he not? I half expected to find you dead when I first got here. So, congratulations for surviving in this filth, I suppo-"

Peter doesn't care if it's weird, that they've *never* done this before. That he's only met Loki once or twice before now. He's up from the ground in an instant, burying his face into Loki's coat and hugging him tightly around his chest. Peter can smell a lingering of Stark Tower on his coat, and the smell of home hits him so hard he almost starts crying again. Loki stumbles back quite a few steps, sputtering in surprise and his arms up in the air.

"What in the world? What are you doing?"

"Sorry," Peter manages to croak out, and he forces himself to let go of Loki just as quick as he hugged him. He takes at least ten steps backwards in a second, feeling his face grow hot with embarrassment, but it's wavered with the awe he has to see Loki standing here at all. "I'm sorry. I just- Sorry."

Loki stares at him with an unreadable expression. How can Peter say that he was so relieved to see someone he knows that he hadn't thought about the repercussions of hugging a god that definitely views Peter like he's just an ant?

"I have had worse greetings... do not do it again." Loki clears his throat, and Peter nods furiously, thankful the god didn't smite him or turn him into a toad or something.

"Wh-What are you... I mean..." Peter can't get the words out.

It's been weeks since he's been here, and he hasn't spotted a soul that he knew from home. He's still not sure if he's dreaming or not.

"You can imagine my surprise when my brother finds me and tells me that the Spider-Child has been snatched out of thin air by a snake." Loki ambles towards the edge of the roof, peering down at the street. It's the same gaze that Peter imagines he uses to watch Earth while on Asgard. "Stark is in a mess of worry, practically losing his mind, almost-"

"Is he okay?" Peter doesn't think about interrupting, but he does it anyway. Loki side glances at him, but Peter doesn't take it back.

“His health is fine.” Loki informs him. Peter prays that this means what he thinks it does, and that Tony’s heart isn’t in trouble because of Peter. “That does not matter and it bores me to talk of it. I came to provide my much needed assistance to the Avengers, of course, when I heard you were kidnapped.”

“You... came to help me?”

Peter is well aware of Loki and his Lokiness.

The god raises a brow, hearing the question beneath the question. “Yes, I did. Is that so hard for all of you to believe? Honestly, you would think that *I* was the one that kidnapped you.”

Loki scoffs, crossing his arms and looking out towards the city again. His eyes narrow for a moment, and Peter turns his own gaze to the skyline. There, among the lights, Peter notices a shadow cross between buildings. Peter waits, heart thudding in his chest, as Batman and Robin pause. But they don’t turn their eyes towards Loki and Peter.

Instead, the two vigilantes sink into shadows, headed in the opposite direction. They hold still for a few heartbeats to make sure, and then Peter turns his attention back to Loki.

“What has been going on, on their end?”

“They figured out who Dr. Ohnn is. Quite scatter-brained that one, despite the fact that he was brilliant enough to create a means to cross dimensions in such a menial way, a mockery of a god’s ability.”

“Yeah, uh, he’s a piece of work, alright.” Peter agrees, but he’s still caught on that... “Wait, so, they know who he is?”

“Yes. He is a disgraced scientist turned multidimensional traveler. They have not been able to catch him. He’s slippery, that one.” Loki sounds impressed by Ohnn, and Peter’s eye twitches. This is his life that’s been turned upside down, here. It isn’t impressive (it is) it’s a pain in the ass and very traumatic!

“In any case, they are now aware that you are in an alternate dimension.” Loki continues, sounding more bored about that... No, disappointed. “Stark has not yet figured out the technology behind Ohnn’s research, as the man never kept digital copies of his work. But he was able to track Ohnn’s signature through dimensions, albeit, he needed *my* help for the next part: finding you.”

Loki grins wickedly, all too pleased at the idea that Tony had to ask him for a favor. That doesn’t bode well, Peter thinks they should keep an eye on that.

“And here I am.” He gestures towards the city. “In this dilapidated, disgusting city. You know, I could appreciate the pure chaos that this city exudes, but... There is something nasty about it that I can not bear to look at.”

Peter wonders if the God would be able to sense if Gotham is alive, like so many Gothamites say it is. Sometimes, Peter believes them.

“...Tony was looking for me?”

Loki turns back to stare at Peter, now, his brow furrowed and his eyes calculating. “You thought he was not?”

Peter’s face feels warm. “I just... I dunno, I thought he would, but-” He has no idea how to explain that he trusts Tony with his life, but he has a stupid parasite in his brain that tries to convince him otherwise.

“Searching for you is all that Stark is doing.” Loki says, and Peter’s chest feels light. “Again, doesn’t matter. Ohnn arrives every few days into our home dimension, and before an Avenger is able to catch him, he makes his way back here-”

“It’s the same for me. I get just close enough and then he jumps away.” Peter clenches his fist, realizing that... It wasn’t just him, after all. His mentors were struggling to catch Ohnn as well.

“Yes, yes, I figured as such, since you had not arrived back to the dimension you belong in.” Loki waves Peter’s interruption off, and Peter wonders if he’s just getting lucky that Loki isn’t annoyed with him yet. “Well, Thor asked me for a favor, and here I am.”

“You came to-”

“Get you? No.” Loki’s words make Peter snap his mouth shut, and he glances away from the god. “Why are you making that face? If I could just simply grab you and go, I would. If I tried to bring you back on the path that I take, your entire body would turn to dust for *good*.”

“...Oh...” Peter nods slowly.

“The first matter we had to overcome was that you had been out of your school for two weeks. Stark had told your teachers you contracted a ‘cold’ and to prevent you from infecting your fellow students, you would take your classwork at home and rest.” Loki explains.

“Wait, what about-“

“Your teachers accepted this, but now it has been two weeks. Stark could not send you back, as you were not there, and I was told that if you did not return, that is when people would start getting suspicious. Maybe assume that they should take you away.”

Peter’s voice is gone, his entire body growing cold not from the night air, but from anxiety welling up inside him. No, not anxiety. *Fear*.

“They can’t take me from Tony-“

Loki ignores him again. “Of course, I granted them another benevolent favor. A quick conversation with your little friend and a snap of my fingers, and my illusion magic has that covered.”

It’s his turn to stare at Loki. He waits for Loki to start talking over him again, but it appears Loki is waiting for his question this time.

“...You spoke to Ned? Is he-”

“Also *beside* himself with worry about his friend? Yes.” Loki interrupts, and Peter thinks he should have expected that. Any irritation with that is washed away as he thinks about Ned, and how scared he must be that Peter just disappeared like that. And now Ned is-

“Illusion?”

Loki grins- no, it’s more like... the way a fox grins when it gets away with something. Peter can’t find it in him to be anything but grateful. “An illusion of you, Spawn. It goes to school and interacts as you would, based on the rather thorough schedule and list of habits your friend gave me. We gave it a test run for the last week, and all is running smoothly. Not a single soul has suspected that any issues are underfoot.”

Peter’s mouth presses into a thin line, relief hitting him so hard he almost reaches to sit down. He suppresses a snuffle, instead saying, “Thank you so much, Mister Loki. I-I-”

“No sappy ideas, Spider.” Loki crosses his arms, and Peter nods numbly. “The Avengers will owe me a rather huge favor for all of this.”

“So this is why it’s taken so long?”

“The illusion does not last if I am not in the dimension. It is currently 4AM in your universe- time is tricky, when crossing planes- and I will have to be back soon. However, I assumed it was time to let you know what is happening in our dimension.”

Home... Home is safe, for now. In a way. Ohnn is attacking them, but they aren’t dead, or dying, or injured. And no one is planning to take Peter away from Tony-

~~*unless he wants you gone after this*~~

-and Tony is looking for him. *Tony is still looking for him. He still cares that Peter is safe and healthy.*

“So... ”

“So, until they can get their hands on Ohnn, or until you are able to get back to your universe, I am the go-between. I will come when I can to check on your ‘well being’-” Peter supposes the words are for- “-lest Stark have my head for not mentioning it, and also relaying information from our side. Now, tell me.”

Loki snaps his fingers, and makes a spinning motion. Peter stands there dumbly, and Loki does it again. This time, Peter spins, and Loki hums. “No injuries? No sickness? Be thorough, otherwise, the messenger will be shot.”

“No injuries right now.”

“Right now?”

Peter chews his bottom lip. It certainly does feel like Tony is here right now, drilling him about his health, and he thinks Loki must have gotten so much of an earful that Tony is inside his head right now.

“I got a... *few*, little injuries...?” Peter grimaces. “You don’t have to tell Tony that-”

“I will not hear the end of it unless I do, and I would rather protect my peace of mind than yours. No hard feelings, tell me now.”

Peter huffs with frustration. “The initial attack gave me some bruising, but it went away after a good meal-”

“Let us try again. I need more detail than that.”

Peter’s jaw drops. “What, like a medical report?”

Loki hums, tilting his head in consideration. “Yes. And all about your living situation, as well, no details left out. Potts was certain she would kill me if I did not pry that information out of you.”

He half wonders if he should be annoyed. But instead, it’s just the same feeling as usual. Peter feels warm, knowing that Tony was worried. Knowing that the others are worried about him, and waiting for him to come home.

So, he tells Loki.

He tells him as much as he can, maybe exaggerating the more fun details. He tells them more about Spider-Man, and the vigilantes that are helping him out. He does mention that the vigilantes have no idea Peter and Spider-Man are the same person, but he slides right over that detail fast enough that Loki doesn’t press him on it.

And when Loki leaves, Peter feels a weight lifted off of his chest. And he is left with a promise that the god would return at some point.

Peter returns to his room, and he doesn’t go back out as Spider-Man. He gets some actual rest, and he doesn’t dream about anyone.

-

Bruce drag a hand down his face. “Robin, are you sure?”

“I have no frivolous doubts, and I wouldn’t make this up.” Damian crosses his arms, his cape flipping with a gust of wind. They’re both standing over the scene of the crime, watching as first responders pack up the victims of this rage.

Two-Face had managed to get away. Again. They had tracked him here, to the Upper East End, after hearing talk about his movements through their informants. When they got to this bar, they found that twelve people had been shot, after Two-Face had gone into a rant-something to do with the mayor.

He's angry about the prosecutors on the case, claiming that they had been given everything they needed to put away his murderer. But they had ultimately failed to find enough evidence, and the accused assassin, Deus Johnson, got off of all charges.

Bruce knows that is was Deus, they *all* do. It was just a matter of proving that to a court, and in the end, they had gotten the evidence they needed only after Deus had gotten off. And because it would lead to a double jeopardy if they tried, they were forced to back off. The prosecutors panicked at the public outcry- because for once, a mayor had been decent enough to be liked- and they rushed the case.

And now, Damian decides to bring up not Two-Face, but Spiderman.

Damian, as much as he distrusts Peter, has been stuck on Spiderman since the boy showed up on their radar. He isn't to be trusted either, but Damian had been overcome with respect because, as Damian puts it, he's never seen someone use so many methods of training in one fight so seamlessly.

It would have put a damper on Bruce's pride, if he was a younger man.

Needless to say, Damian had been studying the video of Spiderman to assess his threat level, and in turn, had forced himself into Tim's case on him. The two of them are now both looking for Spiderman together, and a year ago, this would have been a cause for concern. Now, it's a relief that the two of them want to share or work together at all.

"Spiderman being an assassin only reinforces that we can not trust him." Bruce reminds Damian, who pauses. "He could be with the Council of Spiders."

"I was trained by assassins as well." Damian's voice is flat. Bruce hadn't noticed the distance between them had grown during the conversation, but Damian had taken a step backward, then two. He pretends to focus down on the scene below. "I am merely suggesting that Spiderman has trained with one, or others. Not that he *is* an assassin."

Bruce takes a deep breath. He misspoke just now, like he always does.

He hadn't meant to imply...

There was a year that Bruce missed. He wasn't there to help Damian grow into who he is now. Bruce had left a son that was still eager to spill blood and claim his spot as Robin. And when he got back, Damian and become a Robin trained under Dick as Batman, and Damian was regretful of how he had been introduced to his family.

It's still a rocky relationship, despite the fact that Bruce has been back for a while now.

Because he came back to everyone in different places. Tim was his Robin, when he left. And now Tim was forced to spread his wings and find his own place to fly. When Bruce turns to his partner, sometimes, he still expects to see Tim. And he'll be surprised to see Damian in Tim's place.

It felt all too familiar of the period of time when he would turn to look for Jason, and see Tim. Only this time, Bruce had been the one to die.

All of this... it's an adjustment that Bruce is trying to make. That he feels he falls short on, despite wanting to make it better. If he puts his foot in his mouth, if he fails to amend problems before they drive his kids away... He'll never forgive himself.

"Robin, I trust you. Not just for your judgment, or training. But because you have a good heart." Bruce closes the distance to put a hand on Damian's shoulder. Damian tears his eyes away from the scene below, looking up at Bruce. He wishes that he could see underneath Damian's mask at the moment, he wishes to understand what his kid is feeling. "I didn't mean to imply that wasn't the case."

"You don't trust Spiderman."

"I haven't been given a reason to." Bruce says. "He's a young child, but if what you saw was true, and I believe you're right, then Spiderman could be an enemy. If he's with the Council of Spiders and we trusted him blindly, that could cost us a lot. It could cost me you, or the others."

Damian's lips press into a line, and he takes an impatient breath. "I understand that. Do you think that Peter is involved in this as well, then?"

Bruce sighs, wanting to admit that he has a lot of theories about Peter. "It isn't impossible. But we still have to look into that before we make any decisions. If Spiderman is with the Council, and they're after Ohnn, then that could mean that Peter is in far more danger than we realized at first."

"Tony and Ohnn are wrapped up in the Council together?"

"Or Ohnn is wrapped up in them, and when he went after Tony, it directed the Council their way. We'll have to look into what the Council have been doing lately, see if anyone has been keeping tabs on them."

"Red Robin could do it." Damian suggests confidently. "He had mentioned looking into their files on the computer a few months ago and needing to update them. He might know more about that."

Bruce's chest feels warm, watching Damian as he presses his ear to his comms to talk to Tim. A year ago, this same kid would have refused to work with Tim, blatantly insulted or insinuated that Tim would not be helpful or have any information worthwhile. And now, he's trusting Tim...

He sincerely wishes he had gotten to see this transformation. He wishes he knew more about the time that he was away, that he hadn't had to play catch up all this time. But a huge part of Bruce knows that this wouldn't have happened the way it did if he had been there. He often burns what he touches.

“Nightwing?” Damian’s brow furrows immediately. Bruce switches on his own comms as soon as he hears that Dick is on comms. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“I had something on my mind.”

“What is it?” Bruce feels a flicker of worry. Dick being as exhausted as he is, it must be important if it kept him up and made him leave the Manor.

There’s a beat of silence on Dick’s end, then a hum of amusement. *“It’s settled now. Are you yelling at me to go to sleep, or can I tag along on the Two-Face thing? I might as well, considering it’s only an hour until we should get back anyway.”*

Bruce can already see Damian about to retort that they can do it themselves, as his shoulders bristle with worry for his brother that he covers with defiance. But Bruce beats him to it. “Two-Face is done here. We’re going to try and tail his movements from here, but I imagine he’s done for the night.”

“What’s he so mad about this time?” Nightwing asks. *“Have we figured that out yet?”*

“The assassination of the mayor. He’s upset the prosecutors rushed the case and Deus got away.”

“Ah, the good old ‘Justice and strange moral codes’ shtick again.”

-

It took Peter waking up on the second day to fully process Loki’s visit. Yesterday felt like walking in a dream, and he was convinced that he’d wake up at any second to find out that Loki had never visited at all. He spent the day indoors, pacing around his room or playing with Little Legs.

When he woke up this morning, he had finally understood it wasn’t a dream. And thus, Peter was struck with reality.

He’s satisfied for now about Tony, Pepper, and everyone else worrying about him.

Well, ‘*satisfied*’ isn’t the way he should put that, but whatever. What he worries about most is Ned.

Ned is his best friend, and not a day goes by where Peter doesn’t think about how much Ned would love this place. No, not love. He’d be terrified of Gotham. Peter means, like, an alternate reality.

Even this small room would be enough for Ned to talk about. He’d have started making a list by now of all of the differences between their worlds. He would have followed up on Eugene Thompson, saying, *“Peter, this is our chance. If we take a picture of his dad doing something embarrassing in this universe, just imagine showing Flash and watching his face go white.”*

Not to mention the vigilantes.

“Do you think Batman is secretly a meta? Why else would he choose a bat for his symbol, and did you read that the guy is able to sneak into the shadows? What if he has echolocation and that’s why he didn’t put it in his suit? And these Robins, dude! The bo-staff that they use to fight with? Nightwing’s costume is sick, you should use it as inspo for your next suit, because obviously Mr. Stark is gonna make you a new suit, like, any day now. And-”

Peter’s heart twists in his chest, missing his friend so dearly right now that it hurts. Ned is his best friend, and Peter thinks the world of him already. Learning that Ned was helping out with his disappearance meant a lot to Peter. But...

He’s literally playing house with an Illusion Peter right now. He has to wonder how difficult it is- like, emotionally and literally. What if the Illusion Peter doesn’t eat properly, or like, at all? Or what if it’s going around telling people that Peter is Spider-Man? Or... well, Ned would stop those, even if Loki’s illusion magic managed to not be perfect. He’s a god, after all.

What must be more difficult is hanging out with a puppet of his friend. Illusion Peter can’t offer moral support, can he?

What if Ned likes the fake one better?

Don’t be stupid, Peter argues. If there’s anyone in the world that Peter can be sure would miss Peter the way Peter misses him, it’s his best friend.

Ned is just... he’s one of the best people that Peter knows. He cares so deeply about everything, and he gets so passionate about the things he loves, that it’s hard not to notice when he cares about *Peter*, or his friends in general. Peter might have insecurities, but he can’t argue against cold, hard fact.

Because of his longing to talk to Ned, Peter attempts to think of anything that he could do to feel connected to him, somehow. When he misses Tony, he starts building stuff or working on the Jumping Radar. When he misses Pepper, he plays their word game of association. When he misses Happy, he pretends to bother someone.

Usually, when he misses Ned, he starts going through all of their favorite media together in his mind and thinks about what he could be missing, or just recounting the events. *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *One Punch Man*, *One Piece*, *Fairy Tail*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*...

But today, it’s mostly just Ned’s favorite media that pop into Peter’s mind, and he tries to remember everything he can about them. *Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Amulet series*-

All That’s Left In the World

That thought is what brought Peter to stand in front of the Gotham City Public Library again, for the first time in over a week. He stands at the bottom of the steps, pretty much glaring at the doors as if they’ll tell him if it’s safe or not.

His spider-sense disagrees with his insecurities. There’s no danger to be detected here, nothing that screams he shouldn’t go in. By all means, Peter shouldn’t be worried. Not having

an ID might make things difficult, but it isn't like Barbara is going to get mad at him for it. Last time, she had been very eager to help Peter find a book or two.

Because she wanted you to stick around. His mind reminds him.

Probably for a good reason. He says back.

Yeah, last time he was here... it was pretty awkward. Barbara had been intent on trying to get Peter to stay, and he ran for it. He has no idea why, and that bothers him. He fully intended to never come back.

But... he *knows* this library. He doesn't want to risk another.

And he *really* misses Ned, and right now all he can think about is reading something that Ned likes so he can feel like he knows Ned better. Or that Ned is right there with him. He had seen Ned reading this book plenty of times, it's his favorite one ever. Peter had asked before what it was about, and Ned sort of skirted around it. Now's his chance to actually sit down and read it, and he can talk to Ned about his favorite book, because he knows that Ned hadn't talked about it with anyone else.

So, Peter sucks it up. If it becomes an issue, Peter will just run away. Again.

His stomach grows queasy and his hands are sweaty when he climbs the stairs and opens the door, a tiny voice in his head telling him to go back. Peter makes it be quiet by pretending to squish it to death with a conically large hammer.

He regrets that decision as soon as he looks inside. He'd wonder if it's too late to revive the voice, but that thing is a like a damn cockroach. Unkillable.

Barbara is not in her office as usual, and is instead at the reception desk scanning books. Chatting away to her- or, really, pacing the room and talking at her a little too fast for Peter to make sense of- is the man that was here last time, Dick Gray-

Grayson.

Peter almost wacks himself in the head. *That's* why he suddenly remembered his dad's first last name, before he was adopted. It was Grayson- just like this guy. This is going to be extremely awkward if it gets brought up. More than it already was. *Stupid!*

He peeks to the right of the library, towards the young adult section. He could sneak past, maybe?

Wrong.

It would be hilarious that Peter can sneak around Gotham and hide in plain sight in front of Batman and his Robins, but he can't hide at a damn library in broad light, if he wasn't so annoyed at the predicament. It takes him all of two steps before he's spotted. Barbara- who had mostly been ignoring Dick as he rambles about his brother getting on his case for going out late- spots him. His spider-sense disagrees with Peter that this is a bad thing.

we know her! know! hello!

“Peter!” Her eyes widen. Dick stumbles on his foot mid pace, blinking over his shoulder in surprise. “Hey, you’re back!”

“....Hi.” Peter ignores that his stomach has only gotten worse upon being spotted. He hopes it doesn’t show.

“I was worried that Dick scared you off.” Barbara mutters, and it’s low enough that Peter could ignore it, if he wanted to. He wants to. So he ignores it. “Are you here to check out a book? Need any help?”

“I-I am,” He notes that Barbara has a victorious gleam in her eyes. “B-but I’m okay. I can find it.”

His voice comes out softer than he wants it to, and he’s deliberately ignoring Dick as best he can. The guy is glancing at him while leaning on the reception desk and trying not to make it obvious, and Peter is suspicious that it could be the *‘might need CPS’* stare.

Sweating under their gaze, he hurries away before Barbara can insist on helping, ducking into the sci-fi YA section like it’s his home base. He decides that even better than looking at the front, where they could probably still see him, he’ll check the back first.

A sigh escapes him as he crouches down at the bottom shelf, totally not pouting that he got caught. Well, he wasn’t gonna *steal* the book. He was going to try and check out anyway. But he was hoping that he’d get to work his way up to seeing Barbara, and even then, he hadn’t expected Dick to be here too.

The book he’s looking for might not even *be* here. It’s an alternate universe, after all. That’s why he didn’t want to accept Barbara’s help, just yet. Because what if he asks for this book specifically, and she looks at him like he’s crazy? Then he really *will* never come back. Also, he’s feeling immensely guilty that he might leave this universe before he can return the book, and leave Barbara thinking he’s a jerk of a kid who steals books.

In an attempt to still his nerves, Peter cranes his ears to listen to Barbara and Dick talking to each other, hoping they aren’t whispering about calling CPS on him.

“-really think it was because of that?”

“It had to be. He’s reaching out, trying to make connections.”

It doesn’t sound like they’re talking about him. He lets out a breath of relief, and begins actually searching for the book he wants. He stumbles across a few books that look interesting, but he figures he’ll stick with the potential of the library losing *one* copy of a book, not multiples.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long to find the one. *All That’s Left In the World* sits in Peter’s hands, sort of a short read, and looking the opposite of how Ned had kept his personal copy. The library’s copy is clean cut, and when Peter opens the cover it crinkles as if it’s never been

opened before. Ned's had a lot more personality to it, filled with sticky notes, annotations, the cover practically falling apart because he's read it that many times. Their classmate, Liz, had once told Ned he's a disgrace to book lovers because of how he treats the book, but Ned proclaims that it's his personal copy, he'll do what he wants.

Peter grins down at the copy in his hands, his chest feeling warm like it always does when he thinks of Ned. Hopefully, the book isn't entirely different because it's in an alternate universe, and he can finally talk to Ned about it.

Now... the hard part.

He peeks around the corner of the bookshelf. Dick and Barbara are still talking to each other, Dick leaning in the counter still and Barbara shuffling to grab something on her desk. His entire body shakes with anxiety, despite everything telling him it's okay.

His spider-sense, his own mind- and even that voice in his head are silent. Maybe because it senses Peter is freaking out perfectly well on his own, without its assistance or because Peter beat it with the comically large thought hammer earlier. But it's quiet, nonetheless. By all means, checking out a damn book shouldn't be hard at all. He's done it a bajillion times.

He gulps and looks back down at the book, this time at the excerpts on the back. A single quote stares back at him in particular.

"We're going to be okay," I repeated to him.

If things get hard again, I'll carry him. And he'll carry me. And we'll be okay."

Right. This is about Ned, and that is worth the risk. Ned is always worth the risk.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he walks over to the checkout. His face feels a little numb. But he's doing it. So, points to him. Dick grins over his shoulder, but is checking his phone when Peter gets there, and Barbara grins up at him with a bright, *I-Didn't-Call-CPS-On-You* look.

"This all you getting, Pete?"

"Yeah," Peter taps the desk as Barbara takes the book. "I-I don't have a card..."

"Let's get you one, then." She doesn't mention an ID- in fact, the sign that said he needed one to get a card is gone now- and instead starts asking him questions. "Full name?"

"P-Peter Grayson." He cringes because he can't change it *now*, and he tries not to glance at Dick. His attention is pulled towards the older man anyway.

"Hey, name buddies." Dick smiles at him, setting his phone down.

Peter doesn't reply.

"Date of birth?"

“8/10” Peter mutters, ignoring Dick’s smile growing awkward from the corner of his eye. He just waits for the inevitable blow asking for his mailing address, an email, postal code (he has no idea), or-

“Okie dokie,” Barbara reaches for a drawer. Peter blinks at her. “Hey, this time, I have something other than peppermint. How do you feel about M&M’s?”

That’s it?

Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth!

“They’re good.” He feels like something just happened here, but he doesn’t want to say anything about it. Technically, his last card in his home universe had been from when he still lived with Ben, and no one ever thought to check it out. He always returned books on time.

Dick slides over the bowl of packaged M&M’s, and Peter takes one out. Barbara is checking the book out with no problem, but he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. It’s going deceptively well, and that never happens.

“Is this a book for school?” Dick asks.

Peter shakes his head.

“Ah, cool.” Dick winces, clearing his throat. “Just for fun, then?”

Peter decides to put him out of his misery.

“My friend likes it.” He replies, and Dick’s shoulders release some tension. Why is *he* nervous? “I’m reading it to surprise him.”

“That’s sweet of you.” Barbara hands him the book, and Peter almost takes it and runs. “I think my friend read this one too, she said it was great.”

“Y-Yeah. My friend’s copy looks like a personal journal, so I think it’s good. He has good taste.” Peter wants to shoot himself in the mouth, because why does regular conversation feel so weird? He should leave-

...?

Peter turns his head to the door just in time to see the *coolest dude ever* walk in.

He’s about as tall as Dick with messy black hair, a white streak at his forehead. He has a few piercings in his ears and a silver necklace with a scythe design. He has heavy black boots, black motorcycle gloves on his hands and a red motorcycle helmet tucked under his arm. He’s wearing a black graphic sweatshirt with a school Peter doesn’t know the name of on the chest and wrapped around one arm, and he has dark green cargo pants on that has a chain on the beltloops.

Cool...

cool!

“Hey, Blue, why the hell are you ignoring my texts? I finally get around to texting you first and you decide ‘*nah, I think I’ll make him fucking wait.*’ What’s up with that?” The guy complains. It’s when he’s tucking his phone away into his pants pocket that he sees Peter and slows down. “Oh. Hey.”

Peter grins awkwardly, waving back. He senses movement behind him and glances back at Dick, who clumsily leans back against the counter and presses his lips together in a tense smile at Peter.

Okay...

“Geez, a little warning there’s a kid around would have been nice. Sorry for my language.” The new guy sets his helmet on the counter, and Peter’s eyes follow it. He’s always wanted a motorcycle, but the dream was crushed when Tony said he’d destroy it if Peter got one. Something about them not being safe at all.

“I’m a teenager, not a kid.” Peter mutters, wondering why it bothered him more than usual. Maybe ‘cause the guy is cool.

Cool Guy smirks, holding out his hand. “Alright, Teenager. Name’s Jason.”

“Peter.” He shakes Jason’s hand, making sure the grip isn’t wimpy. “I like your helmet.”

Indeed, now that he’s closer, Peter can see the design on it much better. It’s subtle, only noticeable if you’re close, but there’s a thorn design wrapping around it that shines red-ish in the light. Jason’s smirk grows wider.

“Thanks, kid. I have another one outside with a skull. I usually make Dick wear the one I made for our sisters, though. It’s the only one that fits his head.”

“What? My head isn’t small.”

Peter chuckles, clutching the book in hand and wondering if now is the time to leave. But Jason keeps talking, and he doesn’t want to go without saying goodbye to Barbara, at least.

“You,” Jason points at Dick. “-have been ignoring my texts.”

“I wasn’t ignoring them. I was taking my time to reply.”

“Hey, kid.” Jason pats Peter’s shoulder. “Do you know how many hours of sleep someone is supposed to get?”

“7 to 9 hours a night for adults, 10 for teenagers.” Peter replies automatically.

“7 to 9 hours.” Jason repeats, pointing at Dick. “And you got- wait, 10 hours?”

He turns back to Peter to explain. It takes a second for Peter to realize that’s what he wanted.

“Kids 6 through 12 years should sleep on average 9 to 12 hours, and teenagers aged 13 to 18 should sleep 8 to 10 hours, but it’s highly recommended for 10. But school opens up earlier for teenagers, and adding extracurricular activities and homework means that average teenager gets 6 to 7 hours instead.”

“Well, shit, I didn’t know that.” Jason’s brow furrows, turning back to Dick. “Is Tim getting that much sleep?”

“Definitely not. He power naps any and everywhere, but that doesn’t mean he’s sleeping enough.” Dick grows concerned. “Should we tell Bruce or Alfred? Don’t they know?”

“He might kill us if we do that.” Jason says this as if it’s a serious threat, not just a metaphor. “Also, why the fuck would *I* tell Bruce anything?”

Wait.

Tim? Bruce?

Peter glances between the two of them as they talk, the names dancing around his head. It isn’t until he hears: “Steph might be the only one who can right now, ‘cause Tim is terrified of her.” that it clicks in his head.

Tim and Stephanie- *Tim* is Jason and Dick’s brother. The one he met at the school and at the hardware store. Coupon himself. Stephanie mentioned a rich dad for Duke and Tim, a man now called Bruce. Bruce. As in, the only rich person he’s heard of named Bruce in this town, so far, is Bruce Wayne.

The *billionaire*.

And unless there are other rich Bruces in Gotham, Peter is going to say that this *is* Bruce Wayne that they’re talking about. Nightwing mentioned that Bruce Wayne has a son with the last name Grayson.

As in. Dick Grayson.

He looks at Barbara, who is looking at him. Neither of the brothers have noticed. But Barbara- her face *screams* that she knows what he’s thinking. That she must be able to read minds, or something of that nature, because she *knows* Peter just made a connection to something.

“Um, thanks, Miss Barbara.” Peter says, swiftly pocketing the M&M’s into his pocket. “But I gotta get back to work now.”

“W-Wait, Pete, do you want any more M&M’s? You know no one ever really comes by, and you can take as many as you want-”

“I’m good. Bye!”

Peter is out that door in seconds, leaving behind two bewildered adults and one who might think he’s caught on.

Because- well. Peter thought Tim is Red Robin. That Stephanie is Spoiler. That Duke is Signal. And if he's right, Peter isn't just being stalked by Red Robin out of costume.

His gut twists with anxiety, clutching the book in his hands and feeling like the world is both falling into place *and* falling apart. If he's right, then Dick Grayson is Nightwing. And Jason is Red Hood.

And they *know*. They knew the whole time.

And obviously, Peter shouldn't be mad about that. He *isn't* mad about it. He of all people can't be mad about secret identities. That's the name of the game, unless you don't get a choice.

It's just that... Peter put his trust into Nightwing, thinking that he'd never see the man's face. But he *did*.

They were getting far closer than Peter realized. The world feels like it's about to give out from under him.

Chapter End Notes

HEYYYY how we doing? I LOOOOVE this chapter, it has such a long section with Nightwing and Peter being sweet so it's very important to me!!

On to other topics: Thank you to all of the folks that comment, make fan art, fan tiktoks (!!!), and are inspired by this work!! It's genuinely so insane to us that we see so many people affected this way, (/pos) and it makes our day! Ry and I appreciate and love all of you!

a little perseverance, and a little uphill climb

Chapter Summary

“Fine, but you’re putting pack the Pumpkin Pi shirt.”

“What? It’s funny!”

“It’s orange.”

“‘Cause it’s a pumpkin!”

“It’s a traffic cone orange. That’s almost neon, actually.”

Dick reaches into the cart and holds the shirt up like it’s a gift from the heavens. “I think it’s cute! Don’t you think so?”

“It’s cute for you.” Peter supplies.

Chapter Notes

hiiii im back again! chapter 7 is kicking my ass but chapter 6 was a joy and a half to write tbh, it's one of my favorites

don't have much to say this time around, so i'll keep this part short. So: word count is 23,745, approx 1hour and 35 minutes

trigger warnings: the usual peter tags of self deprecation and his spotty past (allusion to grief and past abuse). gun violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter didn’t go up to the roofs that night.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, including himself, Peter was fighting to understand how to feel, and when he does that, he likes to run. (Actually, running is one of the things he does best in *most* circumstances.) He’s an expert at three of the panic responses: fight, flight, and freeze.

((He hasn’t quite mastered the fawn response, but he supposes that is a good thing.))

He fights as Spider-Man,

He runs as Peter,

And he freezes when confronted with the *worst* of his issues. This time, finding out that the vigilantes he's been slowly befriending and wanting to trust are actually *much* more aware of Peter and his life than he thought they were, and are very determined not to let him out of their sight, made Peter run. The worst of the issue isn't even this, but that he feels *stupid* about running. And having to actually think about and confront his feelings so he knows *why* he ran is making him freeze up worse than a laptop from 2010 trying to play the Sims 4.

(He's been going to *therapy*, believe it or not. If Tony hadn't been adamant about the whole thing, like a fucking hypocrite, Peter would have remained as emotionally stunted as he was before the whole 'getting a family that finds it too hard to die' thing. Isn't that funny?)

Peter just couldn't stand the idea of Nightwing checking up on him again- or even seeing Red Hood for that matter- which led to him staying inside. If either of them had showed up, he would have to face the fact that he knows their secret identities. At least, he's pretty sure...

Oh, *who* is he kidding? He fucking knows!

There is no use fighting it at this point. They all match the descriptions, even if he hasn't seen their faces. He had been suspicious of Tim, Stephanie, and Duke when they first met (stalked) with him as civilians. (He's pretty sure they were surprised by his sudden drop in at the school, and they used that as an excuse to get close to him. Of fucking course Peter chose the one school in Gotham that two vigilantes go to, and managed to stumble into both of them.) Plus Stephanie had been injured in the same place that Spoiler had been. But it's confirmed now, no longer suspicion, because he got the final piece of the puzzle.

Dick and Nightwing, Jason and Red Hood, Tim and Red Robin, Stephanie and Spoiler, Duke and Signal... which leaves Bruce fucking *Wayne* as Batman, if he's going along that route?? Bruce Wayne????

Peter had been confronted by that guy's stupid face the entire time he was booking it back to Benny's. Billboard? He's there. Bench? There. A *mural*? There. Peter half expected him to appear out of the darkness with some stupid rich guy suit on and be like "*Peter,*" (this is said in the Batman voice) "*-you can trust my gaggle of children and me. Swear.*"

Robin must be yet *another* child he doesn't know about- how many does that stupid old rich guy even *need*? Is he running a damn orphanage?

(The only solace that he has in this situation is that he at least has another billionaire on his list of people he's annoyed. Tony counts.)

He panicked, of course, because that's what he always fucking does. Like some stupid little rabbit that gets spooked at the sound of a leaf rustling. Pathetic, is what it is. Peter wonders if it's too out of pocket to invent time travel just to avoid this entire situation. He could do time travel, he could figure it out.

It isn't... It isn't that-? Ugh! How does Peter even explain this to himself!?

When he started opening up to the vigilantes, it was because they had something to offer him: help with Ohnn, without getting too close or taking risks. Because if there is one thing Peter will do, it's run away before someone gets too close. He's been burned too many times before to trust that nothing will happen, even if he *likes* the person he's talking to.

If he goes missing because Ohnn managed to find Peter, then someone will go looking for him. They probably would have anyway, if Peter just stopped showing up. But with what they have, they at least have a suspect now.

It's actually *unfair* that Peter has kept them in the dark that this long. Peter knows that. He just tries to ignore it.

But he didn't know their abilities, how they fight, what their process is. The Avengers were not always heroes. (Save for Steve, Peter thinks the guy popped up with a heart of gold and he refuses to listen to his story, to keep at least a couple more years of the hero-worship alive.) Sure, they all fight for people now, but Natasha was an assassin since childhood, Bucky was a soldier turned brainwashed assassin, Dr. Banner was trying to make a super soldier serum, Tony was... Tony Stark. Thor was a God Alien Guy, who was out of touch with humanity.

Peter doesn't know what Clint was.

Point being, Peter trusts them with his life *now*, because he knew he had a backup, a way to get away if shit hit the fan. He knows zilch about the Bats. They scrubbed their wiki of that and in turn, made it impossible for Peter to know something about them without interacting with them.

And here's another thing:

It's not like it isn't obvious Peter doesn't have anyone watching him, or making him go to school, all that. The vigilantes have made it clear they aren't happy with Peter's situation. And what with Ohnn chasing him around, they're *going* to keep an eye on him. It is an inevitable situation that he has to deal with. They don't know he's Spider-Man, they don't know he's not *just* a kid that got caught up in some shady business.

So he should know that of *course* they'd watch him as civilians, too. (He knows. He *knows*. He *knows that*.)

There's a lot of reasons as to why Peter would avoid them so much.

And yet, he thinks he might know what is *really* bothering him: He had pushed himself to trust Red Hood and Nightwing. He took comfort in that as long as Peter is just *Peter*, he would never see their faces. There was a barrier between them that prevented each other from getting any closer.

They'll help me, but from this distance.

He took comfort in that distance, like watching a light across a harbor. Every light that had stood by Peter's side, that he allowed himself to feel the warmth of, eventually was snuffed

out. Gone, in the blink of an eye. One day there, an ever steady presence, and the next day their life was cut short. Peter has always been a shadow in their light- he still is. He stumbles in the dark now, trying to remember what it was like when the light was on and he knew where everything was.

And upon seeing underneath that mask, it made all of it too real, too sudden. When the mask was gone, Peter saw himself as he is, and that was terrifying.

He's not just an Avenger and a vigilante. He's also a scared kid who misses his family, and he can't put himself in two different categories if he can't do that with them.

Spider-Man and Peter aren't the same person. But they *are*.

It's blurring the lines of who Peter is trying to be and the reality of his person. It's harder to pretend that he's alright when he knows who he is talking to. Suddenly, they are people like him, people who want to help him. Who want to get close to him, to figure out what makes him tick. He's vulnerable, exposed to the outside perspective.

When he's Spider-Man, no one can hurt him. When he's Peter, they can.

When he's Spider-Man, he can *save* people. When he's Peter, he can't.

Spider-Man is *better* than Peter, he's able to fight, and save, and he can always get back up. Peter has to be human, and that had never worked out for him before the bite. Peter's humanity had left him cut down over and over again. When Peter got back up, it would hurt the people close to him. But when Spider-Man gets back up, he can protect them.

They're not getting close to Spider-Man.

They're getting close to *Peter*.

They *see* him. They're looking at his face, seeing him as he is, and they don't understand the risks that comes with that. Try as he might to learn otherwise at his mentors' and his foster parents' insistence, Peter will always believe, deep down, that it is *his* fault the people he cares about die.

After all, there is this super long list of names of people that died trying to take care of Peter.

So, he didn't go out to the roof. He laid in his bed, staring at the ceiling above him and counting the water damage spots that he sees. He read the book that he checked out from the library, hoping to think only of Ned and not that his world could come crashing down. At one point, he heard one of them swing by, but they never came close, and left after an hour.

Were they waiting for Peter? Were they watching the roof, wondering if he'd come out to talk? Did they know that Peter figured them out?

How can he face them after this?

And if he does, who is Peter going to be? Himself, or Spider-Man?

-

He took a risk the next morning by going out into town. His bag came with him, filled with his tool kits, the book, his notebooks, his extra web fluid canisters, spider-suit, Jumping Radar (it compacts down), and some granola bars for lunch. Putting his mind on something else will help him, for now, and what he chooses to focus on is his “fixing things” business.

(He just needs a little bit where he doesn’t have to think about the Wayne family or their vigilante night life, cut him some slack.)

With that in mind, Peter set out for another district, and made plans to be back before dark. He didn’t want to set up his business in the Upper East Side yet, because it’s a little too close to where he lives. He could be tracked back to Benny’s that way. If Ohnn gets word of his business or just happens to find him, Peter wants to keep Ohnn away from Benny at all possible cost. And instead of heading towards the University District, or even Coventry, Peter crossed the bridge to Burnley.

(Why not go to the richer districts? Because they’re not going to trust some kid that looks like Peter with a shabby tool box to get the job done, and more often than not, rich people skimp out on cash.

It’s the people like Peter that know how to keep good quality service- someone that gets the job done enough and doesn’t steal from your house or business while they’re there. They pay enough to get by and, most importantly, don’t ask questions.)

It’s not his best- or safest- option by any means. He’s just some punk kid in the eyes of the people in this district, closer to Crime Alley and the Bowery both. As soon as he arrives, he feels hungry eyes turn on him like hyenas waiting for him to die so they can pick his bones clean.

However, this is nothing that he hasn’t felt before, so he keeps his head on straight and walks around the business streets, searching for anything he can get his hands on. What he’s looking for specifically are people that look like they’ll have the money to pay- not nearly his usual amount, but it’ll be enough to get food- or won’t beat him up for asking.

Most of the places he finds for the next few hours check neither box.

Peter exits most of the places before he can even get his foot in the door, because they’ll scream at him to ‘fuck off’ and Peter doesn’t want to deal with that, or ask how they knew he was coming in with an offer. Other people actually entertain the idea, but Peter’s spider-senses go off and he bolts out of there like lightning.

A particularly rude and belligerently drunk man that was sitting at a bar threw a cup of water at him and literally pushed him out of the store. The owner hadn’t even looked up from his food and had acted like he had a hangover, so Peter assumed that place was a bust as well. He had sat there in the cold and wondered if he should give up.

But Peter needs the money and the distraction. So he sucks it up and continues on.

By the time noon rolls around, Peter hasn't found anywhere at all to start his Fixing Things business. Taking a break sounds like a decent option, so he does just that. He opens up his first granola bar, parking himself on the sidewalk across from a park. Cars drive past every now and then but for the most part, this area of Burnley is empty.

Likely because people are throwing cups of water at teenagers.

His stomach growls in protest when Peter bites into the granola bar. It's all he's had to eat today, because he had left early before Benny made breakfast, and it's begging for more. The hunger, lately, is enough to hurt. It's been a while since he felt a hunger pain this bad, the kind that makes him woozy, and even begs him *not* to eat.

Peter never understood that. Why is it that he can get so hungry that he doesn't want to eat? Human biology is weird even without the added radioactive spider-enhancements.

Forcing himself to eat his second granola bar, Peter stares at his pants leg. It's still damp from the water, and the October air is doing him no favors. If he had enough room in his backpack, he would have shoved his extra jacket into it, maybe used it as a temporary blanket when he sat down. But he didn't account for water throwing.

Maybe he'll have to go to the rich districts anyway. It's not like they *wouldn't* pay him at all, he's just nervous because of how most rich people are. They either skimp or give too much, and it's mostly the former that he meets. Tony is the latter- he'd practically throw money at people without thinking twice about it.

oh wow,,

He hears the truck before he sees the truck, and not because it's healthy. In fact, Peter equates the sound of this truck to that one time he watched a goose choke and some lady at the park tried to save it's life with CPR.

Spluttering and coughing like an old man on his death bed, an old and dingy, red pick-up truck comes to a lurching stop in the middle of the road. The passenger side door is held together by duck-tape and dreams, the bumper has more holes in it than swiss cheese, convincing Peter this truck has been in a drive-by more than once. The driver curses over the radio, shutting it off with a slam of his hand. The truck bangs and clangs as the driver manages to get it to park on the side of the road.

The driver storms out of the car, yanking his hat off his head and cussing under his breath as he makes his way to the front, attempting to pry open the hood. Peter drops half of his granola on the ground as his jaw drops.

HELLO!! HI!! HI FRIEND!!!

It isn't just any man that is struggling with his truck- It's *Happy*.

Happy damn Hogan.

He's younger than Peter has ever known him, looking straight out of the picture of his boxing days before he was Tony's bodyguard. He's different in the smaller ways, that forces Peter to recall that he's in an alternate reality: a scar along his forearm from a knife, his hands wrapped in bandages, and his nose crooked, dark purple circles around his eyes as if he'd just gotten into a fight a few days ago.

A woman crossing the street avoids him by going towards the back of his truck instead of the front. He doesn't pay her any mind, still trying to shove his fingers under the hood so he can lift it up.

But it's him. Even if it's not *him*, him, it's Happy. He hasn't seen the man in almost a month now, and it feels surreal that he's standing right in front of Peter. As if a part of Peter was starting to think he'd never go home, and was preparing himself to not even have pictures of the people he loves.

It doesn't even matter to Peter that he dropped his last granola in a puddle. He just watches Happy with misty eyes, a lump in his throat making it hard to try and speak.

"Damn piece of shit." Happy grits his teeth, leaning over the hood and taking a few deeps breaths. "I'm gonna fuckin' *kill* Sal and his stupid ass friend. Givin' me a fuckin' truck that doesn't even *work*."

Peter knows that it isn't the best idea. It could backfire- *majorly* backfire. This Happy isn't *his* Happy, and could be entirely different even in personality to what Peter knows. In fact, he might even punt Peter across the street like everyone here does.

But it's *him*. And Peter is a moron at heart.

He jumps to his feet, stuffing granola wrappers into his jeans and gulping down his nerves. His voice is a little too small and crackly for his liking when he speaks up. "C-Can I help?"

Happy- and boy, does Peter have to fight not to burst into a mess of tears and hug what should be a stranger- turns over his shoulder to look at him with a nasty scowl. He gives Peter a once over and shakes his head, sighing and waving him away.

"Get lost, kid."

"I'm good with cars." Peter urges, keeping himself far enough away from Happy's reach just in case. Happy's eye twitches. "This is a classic 1985 Ford F-150- if, well, it looked like it died and came back to life multiple times in a Frankenstein sort of way. But the base, is, like, pretty recognizable even without a good upkeep."

Happy narrows his eyes at Peter in disbelief. Peter, unfortunately, continues to ramble.

"It's a faulty ignition system. I could fix it right now, if you want. You wouldn't even have to figure out how to get it to the mechanic- and like, you know they're gonna try and updo the prices, maybe even annoy you about fixing the bullet holes." Peter's mouth is moving without permission. To avoid his mouth making it worse for him, Peter reaches his arm over the hood and bangs it once.

The hood pops open with ease, and Happy takes a step back. Peter props up the hood, his mouth pressed into a thin line and anxiety rolling through him as he watches Happy's reaction.

The man is taking several deep breaths in and out, rubbing a hand over his mouth as he stares at the engine. He scratches his neck, and Peter braces himself for the inevitable "*Get out of here.*"

It doesn't come.

"I only have \$60 on me."

"That's alright." Peter replies immediately. Happy raises a brow.

"You know this would cost-"

"\$135 to \$350 depending on where you go? Yeah." Peter nods, adjusting the fingerless gloves on his hands and jumping up to take a peek at the car battery without waiting for a real 'go ahead' because it feels like Happy already accepted Peter's help. "That's okay."

"I didn't say-"

Peter has already disconnected the car battery, throwing a sheepish grin Happy's way as he has to tip toe to reach inside the truck. Happy sighs loudly, taking another step back as if a weight has fallen onto his shoulders.

"Okay, fine." He grunts, leaning on a light pole. "Not like a 12 year old can make it any worse."

"I'm 14." Peter corrects as he shuffles towards the driver's seat. Happy makes a noise like he doesn't believe Peter. "I am, seriously. I'm not a little kid."

"Hate to break it to you, shortstack, but 14 *is* a little kid."

"Agree to disagree. In any case, the little kid is fixing your truck for you." Peter has dropped his backpack down on the middle seat next to him and popped off the steering column cover, looking at the components beneath.

"What book in your pre-k classroom taught you how to fix trucks?"

"It was right next to the ABC's and *Hungry Hungry Caterpillar.*" Peter fires back. When he catches a glance at Happy, the man is hiding an amused grin under his hand.

Oh, boy, this went way better than Peter thought it would. Apparently, Happy is Happy, no matter what dimension he's been kidnapped to. No matter how annoying Peter tries to be (or accidentally is), Happy just rolls with it, in his universe. Happy pretends it's the worst thing ever, but if he truly hated it, he wouldn't laugh so much.

Peter finds the ignition switch at the back of the ignition key assembly, looking for the loose wires, corrosion, or maybe even some damaged connections. Fortunately, it just appears to be

loose wires. He shoves a hand in his bag and pulls out his pliers. Happy scoffs in disbelief.

“What the hell are you keeping pliers in your backpack for?”

“Entertainment, sir.” Peter bites back a smile as he tightens the loose connections.

“...You know, isn’t school still in session?” Happy asks, and Peter’s smile turns into a grimace he attempts to keep hidden by facing away from Happy. “It’s noon on a Thursday and you’re hopping into stranger’s cars rather than learning how to multiply.”

“I already *know* how to multiply.” Peter deflects. He hops out of the car and back to the hood, reaching inside to reconnect the battery.

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“What was the question, again?” He sits back in the seat, and realizes he doesn’t have the keys. He crawls over the seat and sticks his hand out of the passenger window, where Happy has his arms crossed and is watching Peter like a principal would observe wayward students at an assembly. Peter gives him his sweetest, most innocent smile that he can manage.

“Keys, please?” He makes a grabby motion with his fingers.

Happy takes a moment to comply, but eventually he drops the keys in Peter’s hand. Peter barely contains a noise of victory, scooting back to the driver’s seat and turning the key in the ignition. The engine rumbles to life- no coughing, sputtering, or any other dying goose noises. Happy looks regrettably impressed.

With that, Peter closes the compartment back up and hops out of the truck after turning it off. He’s about to jump up to close the hood when Happy slams it down himself. A stand off ensues- Happy staring him down and Peter trying not to crack, plastering that oh-so-innocent smile on his face like his life depends on it.

Peter holds up the keys, dangling them in between the two of them. Happy continues to stare at Peter, but he takes the keys back from him.

It’s such a familiar state of being, being seen like this. He and Happy have always had this roundabout way of acting with each other. Happy is an adult who can blatantly follow along Peter’s wish to not be coddled or pitied. He’s always cared, but he pretends not to, while helping Peter out. And Peter cares too, and enjoys being cared about, while also getting to pretend he isn’t. Happy was what made it easier to deal with the Avengers- he made it easy to get to Tony, and not freak out as much.

Which is why it’s 100% expected by Peter for Happy to give up the fight, if they’re really the same.

Happy shakes his head, reaching into his wallet and pulling out the \$60. Because Peter knows better than to reject it, he takes the money without complaint and shoves it into his pocket next to the empty granola wrappers. Peter adjusts his backpack, pretending that he’s about to take off.

“Well, sir-”

“Hold on, I still owe you.” Happy complains-but-not-really-complains. Peter smacks a surprised look on his face even though he had no doubt this would happen. “You hungry? \$60 ain’t enough, and you-”

“Look like the wind could blow me away?”

Happy shoots him an unimpressed glare.

“I get that a lot.” Peter gives a casual shrug. Happy looks more tired than he did earlier. “I had a granola bar for lunch.”

“That’s-” Happy bites down whatever he was going to say (*‘That’s not enough.’*) and instead points at the end of the street with his thumb. Peter, having not taken much notice of the shop because it was dark inside and wouldn’t help him out, now notices the sign that isn’t lit up.

‘Hogan’s.’

“That’s my shop. I’ll fix you a sandwich and we can call it even.”

Peter grins up at him. “Thanks, Mr. Hogan.”

Happy pauses. “That’s it? No, *‘stranger danger’* bells are ringing in your head right now? Nothin’?”

‘I’m just saying that ya can’t reply with ‘Cool’ if anyone other than me says that.’ He hears Red Hood Jason Liar McLiar’s voice in his head.

Well, Peter *isn’t* replying with ‘cool.’ So suck it.

“Nope!” Peter shakes his head. It’s such a comfort to be able to bother Happy like this, even if it isn’t *his* world’s Happy. He holds back his laughter at the man dragging a hand down his face, grumbling to himself as he gets up on the sidewalk and walks towards the shop.

“Hey, what happened to your face?” Peter asks as Happy is unlocking the shop. He can’t help but bounce on his toes in excitement, fingers tapping along the straps of his backpack in his hands. “You look like you got beat up, like, *real* bad. Did you get into a fight? Or are you, like, a body guard or something cool like that?”

He knows that Happy used to be a bodyguard before he ended up being in charge of the security for Stark Industries. Specifically, Tony’s bodyguard. Which is funny to think about now, because Tony is *Iron Man*.

“You should know better than to get into people’s business. ‘Specially in Gotham.” Happy grunts as the door swings open and the bell rings out. Peter walks in front of Happy, observing the small shop with keen eyes.

It’s a sandwich place sort of like a Subway, but much smaller. There’s only a couple tables on one side, a drink counter next to a trash-can, and a line of shelves filled with chips and

cookies and things like that, and then the counter with the checkout. Peter does see other details, though, that reminds him of Happy's personality. The mural on the wall with the tables is from Happy's favorite sports teams, there's pictures of customers and of Happy, posters of baseball stars with autographs on them.

Happy makes his way behind the counter, grabbing a cup from the stack and shoving it into Peter's hands.

"HMMMMM, so you *did* get beat up?"

"I'm a boxer." Happy replies, and Peter can feel him watching as he skips over to the drink counter without complaint. Peter picks a sweet tea, loading it with ice just the way he likes it- practically half the cup. The noise clinks and clangs around the shop, so Peter calls over his shoulder.

"Are you a *good* one, or is your face not supposed to look like that?"

There's a scoff as Happy starts making the sandwich, and Peter smirks while putting the lid on his cup. Happy shakes his head at Peter. "Just for that, I'm not asking what you want on the sandwich."

"I think I'll live." He takes a sip of his drink, his eyes glancing over the pictures on the wall curiously.

There's a lot of faces that Peter doesn't know, obviously. Some look like just regular customers, or maybe they're friends. There's pictures on an opening day, where there's a line out front as people come in to try the new place. Gotham looks softer than Peter's ever seen it, so this place must have been open for a while now. The people in line look healthy, they're actually talking to each other, and no one is passed out on the ground. Peter is making his way down the line, curiously calculating when the picture had been taken and when Gotham had become a boiling pot of sad, when he ends up coughing on his sweet tea.

It's *Pepper*.

Pepper and Happy, on the same opening day as the other pictures. Pepper is young, *really* young. Not that she's old right now, it's just- like- it's weird, seeing her like this. Peter's only ever known her as the CEO of Stark Industries, always one step ahead of her competition and her allies both. She normally wears her crisp business suits and her hair pulled back into the neatest ponytail Peter has ever seen. And though her eyes are warm and she has smile lines on her face, he's been to enough meetings as her Little Assistant (read: Peter didn't want to go to school) to know that her gaze can be full of clarity and decisiveness that can cut through any opponent.

She's got the years of experience, the rough edges that have balanced out into a tool rather than a hindrance to her person. Peter knows this Pepper, (practically her biggest fan, like he was with Tony, before they took him in. And yeah, he's still their biggest fans, but they're also more human than they had looked before.) he knows the Pepper that has gone through so much and uses it to build herself up.

The Pepper in this photo doesn't have that yet.

She has on casual clothes in the picture, with a college on the front of her sweatshirt, and she's hugging Happy's side. She's fresh out of college, maybe still *in* it, in this photo? She does have this sad quality around her shoulders, like she's being forced to carry something heavy, but there's a light in her eyes as she sits next to Happy. The two of them are giving a thumbs up to the camera, holding two sandwich trays.

And right next to *that* picture, is... Tony.

The three of them are sitting together on a bench. Tony and Happy are standing on either side of Pepper in her graduation gowns for the college that was on her sweatshirt. She's holding onto her degree with both hands, beaming with pride and fondness. There are spring trees in the back, blooming with bright pink and white flowers, and someone had put a couple in her hair for her. Not haphazardly- but actually taken the time to braid the flower into the locks of her hair.

Tony is wearing regular sunglasses, not in a suit but still wearing his best. There's a matching flower behind his ear. He's relaxed, he's smiling freely. He has one arm around Pepper's shoulders, and the three of them look so... so young.

They never met when they were that young, in Peter's universe. He knows the story of Pepper- who's real name is Virginia, and only got the nickname because she pepper sprayed Tony- working with Tony, and Happy having become Tony's bodyguard before he was working in security for Stark. So seeing it *here*, and seeing Tony so, like... Healthy?

He knows Tony wasn't "healthy" back when he was this age. Tony doesn't talk about it a lot, but when he does, there's a regret, and it always includes some kind of lesson he wants Peter to have. Peter finds that most adults do that, when they actually care about you. They tell you lessons, know that you might not learn it that day, but at least want you to carry it in your back pocket. Tony does that a lot- tells Peter just enough, so that Peter will have something to look back on, to think about. So Peter always listens.

There's not a lot of pictures that Tony will even show him of that period of his life, or what he looked like back then. He swears it's because there just aren't enough photos, but Peter is pretty sure it's because Tony was going through a *really* hard time, and the photos would show a picture of a person that Tony doesn't want Peter to see. Because Tony isn't that kid anymore. It's... It's nice, to see him like this.

Happy, healthy, and whole.

"You okay, kid?"

Peter is snapped back into the present. He clears his throat from the drink he had accidentally inhaled, shooting Happy a sheepish grin. Happy isn't looking up, but he can tell he's noticed which picture Peter is looking at.

"You're pretty old."

That's the first thing that comes out of Peter's mouth, rather than what he wanted to ask: the billions of questions he has about Happy's life in this world. What Tony is like, where Tony is, what he's doing, what Pepper is doing, where she's at right now-

"Thanks." Happy replies dryly. "It's not too late for me to put an inhumane amount of mustard on this sandwich."

He says that, but he's toasted the bread and is being meticulous about putting a lot of vegetables and meats on there.

"I meant, like, this place has been open a while." Peter looks back at the pictures. "I'm surprised these aren't in black and white."

"You-" Happy cuts himself off when Peter sends him his patented Angel Face Peter smile. Happy shakes his head, aggressively adding more onions. "I've been open for a few years."

"You got a lot of pictures, I'd say that's more than a few."

"Do you *want* me to poison your sandwich?"

"I have a feeling you wouldn't want to poison a teenager."

Happy glances at the photos- specifically, the one that Peter is looking at. "It's been a while. I put those up when I first got here."

"When you came to Gotham?"

Again, Happy looks up at him. He's trying to figure Peter out, but Peter keeps his face cool, sipping on his sweet tea like he's just a curious kid. Technically, that's what he is. "How'd you know I came *to* Gotham?"

"You've been living here a while, but you can't really hide a New York accent. Brooklyn, right?" Peter guesses-not-guesses, because he's heard this from Happy before. And he's right. It's obviously a Brooklyn accent, hiding underneath the hints of living in Gotham for a while. Peter flips the script, and finally gets to ask what everyone keeps asking him: "How come you moved *to* Gotham?"

"I recognize Queens when I hear it. You tell me first, squirt."

"My dad's business." Peter explains briefly. "We won't be here too long."

Happy's hands hesitate putting fries on the sandwich plate. "I moved here after my friend passed away. Just... couldn't look at New York the same, I guess."

Peter glances back at the photo, dread washing over him.

Pepper is the only one who's at the opening day for the sandwich shop.

Happy must notice his gaze, because he ignores it. "Order up, punk."

Peter sets his tea on the table, and goes to grab his sandwich. He walks back over to the table, wondering what even to say. Tony is... *dead*. In this universe. He never got to... To do anything. He wonders what Tony's life was like, if he- If he ever got to become someone more than his childhood. Tony went through hell and back just to get a new, good life, the one he has now. Peter has always admired Tony, but he admires the man as he is currently more than he ever admires his past.

What if Tony never got to grow past that?

"My friend grew up here."

Peter looks up from his seat, where Happy is preparing another sandwich. He doesn't look up at Peter while he works, and he looks older than he did a minute ago.

What was *Happy* like? Without Tony around? Does he still talk to Pepper? She's not... No, she isn't dead. There's a recent picture of them sitting together, hanging above the register space. She looks older in this photo, but none the less okay.

"Well, not *here*. He lived in Bristol, up the way." Happy shrugs. "Pretty much all his childhood. His parents lived in New York for the most part, but he was a Gotham kid. When he died, I just felt like he'd miss Gotham. Not Bristol, 'cause he hated it up there. But..."

"Home." Peter finishes.

Happy glances up at him now, and it's Peter's turn to pretend he's not paying attention to him. He pops a couple fries in his mouth, trying to look outwardly calm, hoping he isn't staring too hard at his plate. He wonders vaguely if he's ever been successful in doing that-looking calm.

"Was it worth it?" Peter asks, and Happy's brow furrows. "Moving to Gotham? Do you feel closer to him?"

For the first time, Happy doesn't bother to hide the ghost of a smile on his face. "Yeah, I guess I do. He was a pain in the-" Happy cuts himself off, and Peter raises a brow. "...butt-"

"Just say ass. You sound lame when you try not to cuss."

"I'm not cussin' front of a kid."

"You lose Cool Points when you say *that*, too." Peter scoffs. "It's not like I've never heard a cuss word before. And I mean it, you lose Cool Points when you do that. You gained them with the whole boxer-at-night aesthetic you got goin' on."

Peter can't hold back his smirk. He shrugs, taking a large bite out of his sandwich, and relishes in the way Happy scrunches up his nose when Peter hides his mouth behind his hand as he talks. "Afywayf, fou can 'ust fay 'aff' it ain't fe en' of fe world."

"Don't talk and chew, you're gonna choke and I don't know shit about the Heimlich maneuver, so you'll die. Do you wanna die in a damn sandwich shop, punk? That's how you wanna go out?"

Peter snorts, but he does properly take his time to chew his food. He swings his legs in the chair- no, he's not *that* short, the chair is just pretty tall- and he comments. "This is a pretty good sandwich."

"Wow, it's almost like I got a whole business that relies on me makin' pretty good sandwiches." Happy snarks. Peter laughs, feeling, for a moment, like everything is going to be alright. It almost feels like he's back home, and that at any moment, Tony will come pick them up, maybe even order more sandwiches so they can eat them in the car.

And then it all hits him.

How much he wants to go *home*.

It smacks him the face, actually. There's a tug at his heart that is overwhelming, and Peter focuses entirely too much on the sandwich in an effort to hold back tears.

He spent so much of his life running and hiding from people. Never letting people get too close, because he could lose them, or they'd hurt him. And it hasn't even been *that* long since Tony and Pepper took him in- just about a year. But in that time, and the months before then when they didn't even know his first name- when they just knew him as "Parker"- he had grown so close to them.

He feels stupid, thinking back to earlier, and why he came here at all to this part of town. He avoided the Bats because of something so... Something he thought he was growing out of. Back home, he had just started making the distinction that maybe Spider-Man and Peter aren't so different after all. That maybe he *can* trust people. Trust people like he trusts Happy, and Tony, and Pepper... and all of his mentors.

So *what* if Peter knows their faces? Why is acting like this? Why is he so concerned about how people will view him, how they'll see him, and judge him? That part- it doesn't *matter*. What matters is getting home, and Peter has to- He has to suck it up.

He *has* to ask for help. He has to learn to trust, because what if he can't catch Ohnn by himself? What if he's stuck here for more than just a month- what if months turn to years, and eventually Tony and Pepper and Happy forget about him-?

He watches Happy in almost slow motion. The time slows around him, his thoughts running a mile a second.

Seeing Happy again, and knowing that Loki is going to come back some time and remind him of his home, it all feels like a sucker punch. A big, huge, wake up call that he really needed. Sure, he's nervous about Batman- about this Bruce Wayne guy- and his no metas rule. He's worried that they'll turn on him at any second.

But... isn't that unfair to them?

To assume that they'll hurt him, to assume the worst out of them, just to protect himself? He knows that isn't what he's *supposed* to think. He knows there's probably a million different ways to word it. But shouldn't he be giving them the benefit of the doubt? He's been hurt

before, but he's supposed to be *learning* to trust people. And here he was, falling back on everything that he knew, just for comfort. Just to be safe.

But he can't get *home* if he plays it safe.

And... These vigilantes have done *nothing* but try to help him, to be there for him. Peter's insecurities were keeping them at arm's length, maybe even further than that. He was worried, like he always is, that if he gets close, they'll- they'll hurt him, or worse: they'll die on him. It's not like he's asking them to be his family, or his friends. He just needs to trust them long enough to get home, back to his *people*.

They're in the same profession that he's in. Heroes are flawed. All any one of them want to do is save people, to help, to carry the burdens so people never have to feel the way they did. If they can save even just one person, then they should. It isn't a job, it's a responsibility. It's a passion, it's- it's- it's what May and Ben taught him.

That's how Peter views it, anyway. And even though heroes are flawed, it's because they're human.

Happy sits down next to Peter at his table, sitting with his own sandwich. Peter watches him, taking a bite of his sandwich too, and noting the smallest differences in this Happy and the one from home. The grays in his hair aren't there yet, he's broken his nose more times, because it's all crooked.

He should go back to the library.

But for right now, Peter sits and eats in silence with someone that isn't quite from home, but is a comfort all the same.

-

That was easy to say, but Peter only followed through going to the library four days later.

Listen, do NOT judge him, alright? He started thinking about how fast he ran away and got embarrassed. And he does *not* do his best work when he's embarrassed. He needed the extra few days to 1) whine about it, 2) chill the fuck out, and 3) pretend it never happened. He's followed this formula for years, and it works wonders for him. So yeah, he waited three days before making the trip over.

That, and he waited for Loki to make an appearance. However, there's been nothing on that end.

He thought that Loki would be coming to update him every couple of days, or something. What could possibly keep him that busy in their home universe? Tony, Natasha, and Steve were the least busy at the time that Peter was kidnapped. They can handle Ohnn perfectly fine, they're not as inept as Peter. But Loki is just casting an illusion, and he *knows* that Loki can cast illusions in a separate place than he is currently, so he's probably just sitting somewhere, waiting for a reason to cause trouble, right?

Peter would even prefer him to cause trouble here. As long as it meant he was learning about what's going on in his home universe while he does it.

But nothing. Peter's seen *nothing* of Loki.

So on day four, he finds himself standing outside of the library again. Over the past few days, he's been thinking about all of the vigilantes in between pacing around his room, attempting to stave off the discomfort of knowing what they look like under those masks.

Seeing Happy had helped him remember the ache in his chest that made him miss home, that hurt *far* more than any trust issues he could have about the strangers he's hoping will help him. Because while he is absolutely *petrified*, wondering if they're going to turn on him the second they realize he could be a potential threat... he misses his home.

He decided not to be a huge baby about it and treat it like any other mission.

That's right: it's data collection time.

What? Did anyone think that Peter was going to just walk up and tell them what's going on? Give him some credit, man, he's not a loser. A coward? Yeah, maybe. But stupid he is *not*.

Peter doesn't like not knowing more than other people. Wait, let him rephrase that. He doesn't like being Not In The Know. If he knows more than the adult about their current circumstances, he feels a little better. He doesn't have to rely on *them* to figure it out. He had enough of being dragged around the foster system at the mercy of adults that were hanging by a thread, he doesn't need adults keeping him out of the loop *again*.

So yeah, his plan? Let them think they're getting close to him. It's simple, considering that's all they've been trying to do for this almost-month that he's been here.

Before Peter goes prattling off his secret identity as Spider-Man- a potential *threat*, if they're smart- he's going to take the opportunity that's been presented to him. As much as he dislikes being underestimated, it's his biggest asset. They take one look at Peter and they want to protect him, because he's short for his age and has no guardian (at the moment). He just wants to make sure, before he dives in, that he *can* trust them, in and out of the suit. He doesn't want to be blindsided. He doesn't want- well-

Yeah, okay, maybe he's *looking* for them to slip up. He's being clever about hiding this from even himself, but that's kind of the goal. He's going to work himself up to telling them the truth, but he's going to wait. He's going to give himself time to sniff around, to *really* understand what they're like, before he says anything.

He just... Has to know. He *has* to know.

...Library.

Peter chews the inside of his cheek, glaring at the front doors. Maybe the embarrassment hasn't truly gone away. Maybe the library card feels like it's burning a hole in his pocket. Maybe he wants to throw up, just like, a little bit. Maybe he's wondering if they *know* that he

knows, because Barbara had to have noticed, right? And if they know that he knows, will he know that they know that he knows? Will they all know? And what if they get weird about him knowing? He's thought a lot about it over these few days, and he's decided that he'll just pretend that he doesn't know, unless they bring it up first.

That's a good plan.

He thinks.

(Please don't let him bomb this.)

The doors open just like every other time, the traitors. Peter bites back his disappointment that they opened, as if he was half expecting the library to be closed. That's why he came so late, after all. It's not that far off from closing time. This was a tactical decision.

(He stalled as long as he could, realized he was stalling, and then cussed himself out and forced himself to go to the library, telling himself that if it was closed, he'd try again tomorrow.)

Immediately, he is affronted with their presence.

Barbara is in the back of the front area, stringing up Halloween lights on the doors that Peter thinks might lead to study rooms and the like. Well, not her, because she's sitting in her wheelchair and just pointing where she wants it to go, but some boy that's Peter's age.

Robin, Peter's mind clarifies for him, when he meets eyes with the boy. He's probably a couple inches taller than Peter, wearing a dark green long sleeved t-shirt and black pants. From Peter's eyesight, he can tell the boy has incredible balance, and he's so light on his feet that it's almost imperceptible. Dark black hair that sticks up out of his face, a scar on his upper lip, and *the* scariest green eyes that Peter has ever seen. No doubt that this is the current Robin- their heartbeats match.

Dick is sitting at the reception desk, his back turned to the door. He has a witch's hat on his head with multiple pumpkins stitched on the ribbon. He's fiddling with a big bag of candy in his lap, his feet propped up on the desk. Jason is sitting next to him, his nose wrinkled in disgust as Dick shovels a handful of candy into his mouth. Cool Guy that he is, he's wearing a dark red hoodie today with a raven design on the front, and he's working on scanning a huge stack of books.

Peter locks eyes with Robin again. The boy waves shortly, causing Barbara to look over her shoulder. She's surprised to see him-

joy!

-and then a bright smile crosses her face. She waves as well. "Peter, you're back!"

"Hey, Miss Barbara." Peter ignores Dick coughing on the handful of candy, and though Jason glances his way, he's preoccupied laughing at Dick. Peter walks closer to the front desk,

waving at the two brothers, before making his way to stand next to Barbara. “Um, are you decorating?”

“Yeah! I didn’t get around to it earlier in the month, but I figured since it’s literally four days away, I should at least *try* to put something up.” Barbara holds up a bucket of Halloween decorations, shaking it and pointing for Peter to see. “These are all *ancient* decorations, from, like, 2005, but they work, so I don’t see the need to buy anything else.”

“Is this satisfactory or not?” Robin sounds annoyed, narrowed eyes at Barbara. He’s still holding up the lights.

“Yeah, that’s good. Hey, Peter, you haven’t met Damian yet, have you?” Barbara looks at Peter, and he can *see* the gears working in her brain. And Peter...

He totally understands what she’s fishing for.

He met Tim and Duke at the school, Gotham Prep. If they’re brothers to Jason and Dick, then Damian must be a brother too. He looks like he’s Peter’s age, so he can assume that Damian also goes to Gotham Prep, and Barbara had seen Peter looking at their academic decathlon website. The only natural conclusion would be that Peter *goes* to Gotham Prep as well: but he doesn’t. And that is *easily* noticeable if they look into it. And they 100% have, so they know he doesn’t go there.

Conclusion: Don’t say anything about it at all!

“Nope.” Peter grins at Damian. “Nice to meet you. How’s the weather up there?”

Damian has the *most* amusing reaction to the shitty joke when he turns to look at Peter- like he’d just eaten an amalgamation of mysterious slimes. However, he must be used to shitty jokes, because he finds it in himself to let it go, mysterious slime and all. “Pleasure to meet you as well.”

!!

“...Need a hand?” Peter glances to the side, then back to Damian.

Damian scoffs, and Peter can *hear* the ‘lone wolf’ in his voice. It’s not grating, so Peter lets it slide. “I am very capable of putting up some simple decorations without assistance. You are not needed.”

“Alright, suit yourself.” Peter shrugs, picking up a fluffy toy spider from the bucket of decorations. He spins it in his hands, eyeing the lights. “Hey, Miss Barbara?”

“Call me Babs, Peter, the ‘Miss’ makes me feel old.”

“Alright, Babs.” Peter nods. “So, you said these are from 2005?”

“Yeah?”

“Which means that battery box that’s currently catching on fire, no one thought to check that out?” Peter points in the direction of a shelf, which is holding the battery box end of the lights. It’s starting to spark on the shelf, next to a stack of printer paper.

“Oh, shit.” Jason is up in a flash, grabbing the box off of the shelf and turning it off. In the panic, Peter notices the ladder underneath Damian shake. When Damian turns to see what is going on, Peter drops the spider back into the decoration bucket, and uses one hand to grip the bottom of the ladder, preventing it from tipping over.

“Thing’s totally fuckin’ busted!” Jason holds it up, showing off the melting sides. “How’d you notice that?”

“Educated guess.” Peter shrugs.

watching

“You wouldn’t *believe* how many times my Aunt caught fire to stuff on accident. It’s a good thing her husband was a firefighter.” Peter spares a glance over to Dick. He’s still got that stupid witch hat on his head, but his eyes are pretty serious. He’s studying Peter like one would a particularly difficult puzzle. When he notices Peter has looked his way, he drops into a small smile, unable to hide his thoughts.

At least he’s easier to read this way, without that domino mask on. Right now, he can see that Dick’s gaze is primarily on Peter’s hand, where he’s preventing the ladder from shaking.

“Good catch, Pete.” Babs looks up at Damian with a sheepish grin. “Heyyyyyy Dami...”

“I already know what you are about to ask of me.” Damian is totally resisting the urge to sigh. “Yes, I will take the lights down as well.”

“Thank you!” Babs says sweetly. “We’ll have to get some new lights, ‘cause this place needs them, it’s so dark and dreary in here.”

Peter looks up at the lights above him. He could probably fix those in no time at all, but that isn’t what he’s here for right now. And besides- Jason is already tugging the battery box off and setting it on the counter, and Peter can tell that his attention has focused on him. As Jason scoops up the book stack on the counter, he says, “Hey, Petey. Come help me with these?”

Babs is focused on her phone, looking for new lights, so Peter walks over to take the stack of books. Jason gives a toothy grin as he adds more and more, and Peter pretends that the stack is getting heavy.

“I need someone to hold these while I put these back on the shelf. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah, sure.” Peter shoves aside the fact that he was sort of looking forward to talking to Jason the most. He’s talked to Red Hood more than the others, and Peter just... well, the guy is cool. And Peter is a sucker for that.

He also ignores that there is a book cart right behind Jason, that could be used for this exact purpose, no Peter involved. They really aren’t even subtle about it.

Jason pats his shoulder, "Alright, my man."

"You didn't ask *me* to help." Dick pouts out his bottom lip. He's back to before, when he was just a guy eating a gross amount of candy, instead of a guy with a detective's glare.

"Peter's cooler." Jason says, and Peter tries to hide his grin behind the stack of books. "I mean, look at you, wearing that *ridiculous* hat."

"I'm cool too!" Dick protests. "The hat is whimsical and charming! Right, Peter?"

Peter covers Dick's face from view with the stack of books, instead looking up at Jason. "Where to first?"

Jason barks out a laugh, putting both hands on Peter's shoulders and steering him away from the reception desk and towards the bookshelves. Dick, to his credit, doesn't whine about this until he thinks Peter and Jason are out of ear shot. Unfortunately for him, Peter can still hear.

"The kid totally thinks I'm lame..."

Peter might have to fix that later. But whatever. He's hanging out with Red Hood right now, and that's a lot of fun. Nightwing can wait, right?

"We're not keeping you from anything, are we?" Jason stops at one of the shelves in the back, grabbing the book from the top of the pile and putting it up. Peter follows alongside him, having to peek around the stack of books to see Jason's face at the moment.

Is he asking that because Peter ran away the last three times he was here? ...Probably.

"No," Peter says softly. "I was nearby and wanted to see Babs."

Jason's lips tug upwards, but he keeps his face decently neutral. "Checking out another book? I can help you find something, I come here a lot."

"Oh, um..." Peter didn't really have an excuse in mind. He hadn't finished his other book, and he was trying to stick to a *one book* rule until he left this world. "I just wanted to see her. But I almost finished the last book I checked out, so I guess I should start looking for another."

Something in that answer catches Jason's attention, but Peter can't tell what exactly. Jason picks up the last book that was making Peter peek around the stack, so now Peter is looking up at Jason normally. He slides the book back in its place, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes.

"Babs said you like sci-fi."

She told them that? That doesn't seem like relevant information to give. What could they possibly learn about Peter's interest in books?

"Um, yeah?"

"What else do you like? I know this place back to front, I'll find you something good."

Peter blinks at him... It... *would* be cool to get a Red Hood recommended book. The figurine for Red Hood is sitting in his backpack right now, but Peter suddenly remembers that it would be a little fucking embarrassing if Jason knew that he carries it around like a little kid. He swears, it was just because he forgot it was in there.

“What do you recommend?”

He tries for a polite smile, but it’s probably looking nervous. It definitely comes out more nervous. Jason doesn’t mention it. He just looks pleased that Peter had asked. “You want to branch out from sci-fi?”

“Sure?”

“When we get these put up, I’ll give ya a few to try out. Ya can tell me what y’think about ‘em when y’come back.”

Peter watches Jason as he puts the rest of the books into place, the stack nearly gone. *When* Peter comes back, not if. Which, like, yeah, that’s how libraries work. Come back and return the book, obviously. But it felt more like he was asking Peter to keep coming back.

They aren’t subtle at all.

“Cool.” Peter grins, handing the last book to Jason.

Jason’s hand lands on Peter’s head, spinning him around and guiding him towards another section of the library. *amused* Peter’s spider-sense hums thoughtfully, listening to the short huff of breath Jason takes. He’s laughing about something, and Peter sort of wishes he knew what was funny.

-

“It’s suspicious.”

“It’s probably normal.” Dick tries, but Damian definitely doesn’t agree with him anymore than he had a second ago. The younger crosses his arms and leans to see where Jason and Peter had gone, nose wrinkled with distrust.

Damian is not a fan of Peter.

He’d more than once mentioned that Peter is not worthy of the trust that everyone puts in him. Which Dick thinks he understands, from Damian’s perspective. Peter obviously isn’t telling them everything that they need to know, but at the same time, it’s been, what, less than a month? It takes time for someone who’s seen the worst of adults to trust adults to have their back.

But this feels more like Damian has a different chip on his shoulder than he’s letting on. Dick would never, ever think about voicing this out loud, but... Damian might be nervous.

After Damian, Duke is the most recent to join the family. It had taken Damian a couple weeks to warm up to Duke, but there’s never been animosity between them. Not like there had been

with Tim. Damian has come a *long* way since he first joined the family. But that doesn't mean that there *isn't* nerves about his standing in the family, still.

That's all Damian has ever wanted. Talia is... a complicated person, and she loves her son, but the League had given him a complicated view on family. Damian felt he had to prove himself in order to have Bruce's attention, if not love. He had felt threatened by Tim when Damian first came into the family, and nowadays, it's easier to tell that Damian had looked up to Tim and still does. Despite that he likes to cover this fact up underneath a layer of snarky comments.

They're doing okay now. Tim and Damian have a lot in common, and they're both working on the Spider-Man case and there has been no bloodshed or fights. It's like a dream come true.

But Peter is Damian's age, and everyone has been focused on him and his case as of late. Old insecurities could be sticking around. At least, that's what Dick thinks might be happening. He'd have to *ask* Damian in order to be sure.

But they're at the library and now is not the time for that. Dick drops his feet from the counter and sits up, setting aside the bag of candy and looking Damian in the eyes, hoping to get his point across.

"Just give him a shot. You're the only one that hasn't had a chance to talk to him one on one yet. He's a good kid, I swear. He's not telling us the full truth, but he's not doing that out of malice. Besides, we're keeping secrets from him too, you know."

"*Valid* secrets." Damian points out, still glaring in Peter and Jason's vague direction. "Our secrets protect people and ourselves, and are necessary. His secrets are preventing us from providing assistance, and have any of you considered he's just really good at playing innocent?"

"Yeah, I did. And I scratched that after talking to him." Dick swears. Babs bites her bottom lip, wheeling closer to Damian to nudge his side.

"You know how expressive Dick is? Peter is just like that. He wears his emotions on his sleeve." Babs offers. To Dick's surprise, Damian nods as if that made sense. "Even the best spies show clues with their behavior. There are just some things you can't hide. Unless you're Bruce- which would be a nightmare-, and even try to change your body language so people don't recognize you."

"I don't wear my emotions on my sleeve." Dick protests, but he's heard this before, and is starting to think it's true. "Just- talk to him, once, and you'll see what we mean."

"I do find it hard to believe that anyone would be as capable of hiding themselves as Father is." Damian latches onto that part, and Babs scrunches her face before deciding to take the win for what it is. "Fine. I will talk to him alone. But if I don't like what I see, I won't be pathetic enough to hide my thoughts. I will confront him."

“Dami, please don’t scare him away.” Dick sits up straight. “He *just* came to us first, on *purpose*, and we’ll get more information if he sticks to that.”

That is true, but in his mind, he’s just excited that Peter is hanging out with them. It means they’re doing something right, even if they don’t know what it is. They can’t afford to lose that trust when it had just started building up.

“If Peter is as you say he is, then there shouldn’t be a problem.” Damian retorts.

Dick sighs, holding onto the worry for another moment. But Damian seems sincere in that he’s going to at least try to see where they’re coming from, and Dick doubts that Peter will give him a reason for confrontation...

Dick smiles at Damian, taking in just how serious he is. Dick can see the gears turning in his head as he calculates his next move, and a sudden fondness makes his chest squeeze. He’s truly come such a long way, but *man*, Dick is scared to see how fast he’s growing up. He reaches over and ruffles Damian’s hair, causing the kid to squawk and slap his hand away in protest.

-

It turns out, Jason *does* know a lot about the library. He leads them exactly where he wants to go, barely even looking at the sides of the shelves with the system laid out.

Peter wonders how often Jason has been here to know where they keep this, or if it’s just because this is his favorite section. Peter had never really been that into English- sure, he *likes* to read, but he’s only really stuck with sci-fi, or whatever Aunt May had been reading. Or textbooks. He’s read a lot of research in his time at the library, trying to keep up with school. However, Peter’s arms are now laden with a different stack of books that Jason insists will instill in Peter a newfound love for reading: the first Narnia book, the first Percy Jackson (“*Seriously, Pete, you’ve never read Percy fuckin’ Jackson?*”), *Pride and Prejudice*, and, curiously-

“The Secret Garden?”

Jason hums in affirmation, still looking through the shelf to add to his ever growing pile of books Peter is begging to be able to return before he leaves this world. Peter stares at the front cover for a moment, unable to hide his bemusement. He chuckles, and Jason asks, “What’re you laughin’ at?”

“Nothin’.”

Jason is squinting at him now, one hand up to grab a book. Peter can’t help but laugh again at the expression- Jason, rather than angry, is holding back a grin, but he doesn’t know *what* Peter is laughing about, so it must be a little suspicious.

“It’s just- This was one of my Aunt’s favorites. She read it to me all the time.”

Aunt May had read it to him as a bedtime story, back when Peter was still feeling the loss of his parents and having a hard time understanding change. *The Secret Garden* is a story about a neglected little girl who ends up living with a weird rich uncle who has a mysterious manor, guided by a *robin*.

Not subtle *at all*. But Peter doesn't elaborate what's so funny, but when Peter says he'll read them all, it earns him a smile.

Peter is riding the high of a successful encounter with one of the Bats when everything gets a little more complicated.

Jason is checking all of the books out in Peter's name while Dick and Babs are digging through the decorations box. Dick is now wearing a Dracula cape that is wrinkled to all hell, and Babs is attempting to find more lights to throw out. These are not the complications (yet?).

It's Damian.

He stands next to Peter, and he does a great job of pretending he's not watching him. But Peter knows he is, because Peter has his spider-sense. If he's being honest, the only of the Bats that Peter hasn't immediately felt safe with is Damian.

Sure, he can tell that the others *are* dangerous, even if they're not dangerous to Peter. Jason is pretty huge, and he has scars littered on his forearms and his hands from many a fight. When Dick walks, he's silent on his feet and his movements are swift, calm and loose as if poised to strike any moment. Babs, even, has an undercurrent of energy, and Peter can eye a part of her wheelchair that sticks out as a possible weapon, hidden in plain sight.

There's always the undercurrent of strength that he can sense, much the same as how Gotham always leaves a distant buzzing that never stops. But even still, they don't quite set off alarm bells the way that Damian does.

Peter has met *many* heroes and has studied with people from all sorts of backgrounds. One of his mentors is literally a former KGB spy and assassin, the Black Widow. He's learned *many* lessons from the older spider, but there are some that she has no idea she even taught Peter. Mainly, how to detect another assassin.

He doesn't know Damian's story, but the way he moves, the way he is able to keep his eyes on Dick and Babs and yet, *also* know where Peter is at all times, feels much the same as when Natasha is keeping tabs on where Peter is. Unlike Natasha, who's gaze is protective because she is one of Peter's mentors, Damian's gaze is... well, it isn't hostile, but it isn't *friendly*.

And herein lies the problem. Peter doesn't know how to approach someone like Damian. If he had sensed that from someone else, any other time, he'd avoid them if he could. He doesn't wanna step on toes unless he has to or he thinks it's funny. But he sort of *needs* to talk to Damian at some point, and figure him out the way he's figured the rest of them out.

“Hey, Peter.” Dick is holding all of the rest of the lights from the box, walking a step closer to him and holding them out. Damian leans back on the reception desk and tries to be casual, but he stands with anticipation.

“Yeah?”

“How many of these do we think are salvageable?”

He has an easy going smile on his face, but there’s an underlying agenda to his question. He had been staring earlier, and Peter assumes it’s because, like any good detective should, he had taken note of Peter’s observational skills. The battery box, the ladder. And it’s a silly question, because the box had surely been inspected by the Bats carefully after that earlier almost-fire.

He wants to gauge Peter’s skill levels. He wants to know more. And, well... this *is* what Peter came for, right?

“Probably none of them.” Peter grabs one of the lights, pulling them out of Dick’s hands and inspecting them. “They should be replaced every 4 to 6 years, and there’s a lot of brittle wire here. This one is exposed. You should just go ahead and get new lights so you don’t have to bother worrying about it.”

“Perfect!”

“Perfect?” Peter is thrown off by the cheery tone, and the way the lights are already out of his hands and on the counter.

“I was about to go for a hot chocolate run anyways, we can stop at the store on the way back and put up the lights before we leave.” He says, as if Peter is a part of it. And oh, Peter realizes, he might *be* a part of it. “Damian was gonna come with me, do you wanna come too? We’ll need the extra hands.”

He’s part of it. How'd he guess *that* was coming?

“Isn’t the library almost closed?”

“Yeah, but I have the keys, and it’s warm in here.” Babs is wheeling behind the counter, setting the bucket down. “We’re going to see some of the Gotham Hallow Fest decorations. It’s a couple blocks from here, so we figured we’d just chill here until it was time for it to start.”

Peter has no idea what the Gotham Hallow Fest is, but he doesn’t have to ask. Either it shows on his face, or they remembered he’s new here.

“Pete, you should come with us,” Jason sounds a little too eager. “It’s not one of those scare things-”

“That would be a disaster waiting to happen if it was-”

“-but,” Jason shoots a glare at Dick for interrupting him. “-it’s pretty fun. Since we don’t really *do* trick-or-treating in Gotham, some neighborhoods host Hallow Fest where they decorate the houses all spooky, play a couple horror movies, and sell food. It’s a lot of fun.”

“Your dad expecting you home soon?”

Babs had asked it in a noncommittal way, as if it’s a harmless question. But they all know that it it’s a dig for information. However, Peter can’t lie anymore about it. And he shouldn’t.

“Nope.”

The casual response throws them off, and Peter revels in it.

“It sounds fun.” Peter turns to Dick, eyeing the atrocious hat on his head. “Are you... gonna wear that to the store...?”

Dick is quick to take the witch’s hat off.

-

When Dick had said their plans, he had made it sound like they were going to the store after getting hot chocolate. He had also made it sound like they would just be grabbing lights from the store. Peter thought, *I can make friends with Damian on the way there*, and assumed that this plan was the plan.

It was not. Because of course, it never is that easy.

At the moment, Dick has stopped in front of the clothing section of the store- they hadn’t even made it close to a hot chocolate stand. Damian has his hands in his pockets, grumbling about the time they’re wasting. Dick ignores him for the most part and keeps up his search mission with an eager, cat like grin on his face.

“He’s... focused.” Peter lands on, whispering to Damian.

The other boy gives him a side eye, then heaves a short, tired sigh. “Richard takes shopping seriously.”

“I can see that.” Peter watches as Dick pulls a couple shirts off of a rack, eyeing the sizes, decides they aren’t good enough, and puts them back. “I haven’t gone shopping with an adult in a while, but my Uncle Ben used to get intense about it too. He and my dad both.”

“You don’t go with anyone when they shop for you?”

“Not anymore.” Peter looks at the cart that Dick is amassing. There’s a bunch of t-shirts with bands on them that Peter doesn’t recognize, some have silly puns on them (this isn’t a bad thing, but an orange Pumpkin Pi shirt sticks out as the most heinous), but over all, they’re not anything that Damian looks like he would wear. At least, not willingly.

“I used to go when I was younger but now that I live with my foster dad, he does all the shopping. And it’s mostly online, because he has all our measurements and stuff. He’s not

good with crowds.” Peter and Damian watch as a running toddler falls in front of them, but before either of them can do anything about it, his mother scoops him up and continues as if nothing happened. The toddler starts screaming to be put on the ground again.

“Peter,” Dick is holding up a big blue coat from the rack. He takes it off the hanger. “Stick your arms out?”

Peter, confused, does as he’s told. Dick slings the jacket on over his current jacket, adjusting the collar so it sits correctly on Peter’s neck, then fixing the sleeves. Peter didn’t realize how cold it was, even inside the store. Outside had been colder because it’s nearing nightfall, but now that the jacket is on, Peter recognizes how warm he’s *supposed* to feel. Dick’s smile grows wide, and he grabs a red copy of the jacket and puts it in the cart. “Fits good, so let’s get another color too.”

“Who’s this for?” Peter asks as Dick helps him get the jacket off. Damian raises a brow as if Peter is out of the loop and Damian hadn’t expected him to be, and is disappointed in him. Dick just beams at him.

“It’s for you!”

“No it isn’t.” Peter blinks at him.

“It is!”

“You are not spending money on me.”

Dick hums and doesn’t supply Peter with an answer. He just sets the blue jacket in the cart, turning to a hat rack and combing through the options. The offending t-shirts inside the cart start to make a lot more sense, and Peter can not help the redness on his neck as hard as he tries to cover it.

People spending money on Peter really, *really* freaks him out. He had already made the conclusion that their dad is a billionaire- hell, he let Tim and Duke pay for his hardware supplies and his Batburger meal, and he was fine with that. Go ahead and steal from a billionaire, there’s a 96% chance they won’t even fucking notice. But this?

Peter has *always* been aware of money. He thinks he was born with the ability to know what he can and can’t ask for at the store. May and Ben had always tried to spoil him, but that was reserved for Christmas, where they would get bonuses at work and they could spend it getting Peter a kiddie chemistry set.

Going to the *store* is another thing entirely, because Peter can see the money racking up with each new addition to the cart. They’d spend it on necessities only, *maybe* a treat or two if the month has been good enough for it. Then, in the foster system, he never had foster parents that could sit there and buy him whatever he wanted. Hell, if he got *anything* new, it was because he *absolutely* needed it.

He’s never been the type to get brand new coats right off of the rack. Peter is the thrift-shop kid, he eventually became the lost-and-found kid, the one that would take anything he could

get his hands on. He was ‘church-handouts’ kid. Tony and Pepper have been trying to get Peter more on board with getting new clothes, foods when he wants them, whatever. And he’s been getting cool with that.

But *man* did it feed this hole inside his mind that consumes all of the good that Peter gets, that whispers in his ear that he isn’t good enough for it, that money should be spent wisely and safely, that he should hoard what he can get. And to *never* rely on someone else for it.

“I-”

A hat falls on his head, blocking his view. Damian has made his way over to the other side of the section, so it’s just Dick and Peter standing together. Peter touches the hat and looks up at Dick, the anxiety bubbling up in him despite the man’s million-watt smile.

Dick flicks the lid of the cap, something softer in his eyes, and Peter’s protests fall short in between them.

“Don’t worry about it.” Dick tells him, and for some reason, it sounds more like the voice he uses when it’s just them, sitting on a rooftop over the city. “I have the money, and you’re gonna need the jacket when we leave. It’s going to get colder and colder, Gotham winter’s are brutal.”

Peter chews his bottom lip. “I don’t like owing favors.”

“It’s not a favor.” Dick replies matter of fact. “It’s a gift. I’d just feel better about taking you out into a chilly Gotham street, at night, if you had a nice coat on.”

It’s a manipulative trick, is what it is. Dick has him read like an open book. Or maybe he’s just had a lot of practice with kids like Peter. He knows damn well that Peter wouldn’t accept the charity of it, and he’s phrasing it like it’s more of a favor for him instead. That Peter would be helping *him* out.

It’s not lost on Peter that this is what he’s doing. But he lets it go.

“Fine, but you’re putting back the Pumpkin Pi shirt.”

“What? It’s funny!”

“It’s *orange*.”

“‘Cause it’s a pumpkin!”

“It’s a traffic cone orange. That’s almost neon, actually.”

Dick reaches into the cart and holds the shirt up like it’s a gift from the heavens. “I think it’s cute! Don’t you think so?”

“It’s cute for you.” Peter supplies, and Dick scoffs, lightly hitting him on the shoulder with the offending shirt before folding it and putting it back in concession.

“Fine, fine,” Dick looks over his shoulder to check on Damian, and his eyes catch on the shoe rack. He looks down at Peter’s feet, and before he can open his mouth, Peter interjects with a hurried frenzy:

“They’re my Lucky Shoes.”

“...Lucky shoes...” Dick does Not Look Convinced.

The shoes on Peter’s feet are a little busted, yeah. But they’re *made* that way. Tony didn’t like the idea that Peter has to take off his shoes in order to stick on walls with his feet, when in civilian clothing. Something about it being a waste of shoes when they get stolen, and also a worry that he’ll cut his feet. Peter conceded that yeah, even if the cuts do heal and he wouldn’t get sick, he *does* like not having cut feet anyway.

Tony made these shoes with trick soles. They’re made of material that lets Peter climb on walls anyway while protecting his feet, just like his spider-suit. They’re no longer bloody from his first encounter of Red Hood, because he had scrubbed them with a bleach solution after washing them off as best he could. He did have to re sew the white thread on the side that looks like a spider-web, and he redrew Ned’s signature on the sole. But they’re fine as they are, and Peter isn’t going to get rid of them now.

“Alright, no shoes. Just because this will already be a lot for you to carry.” Dick reaches up and cups his hand around the back of Peter’s neck. Peter grins because he’s won this round. And for some reason, his chest feels warm at the small affection.

This *is* Nightwing, after all. Peter thought he couldn’t see how the two were similar- Dick had been awkward and weird when Peter talked to him, whereas Nightwing was so comfortable in their conversation. But now, Peter can see it.

His thumb traces the back of Peter’s neck as Peter reaches to grab another hat, this time to make fun of Dick with an ugly yellow-colored one with a bad pun. However, Peter hears Dick’s short intake of breath at the same time he remembers what the back of his neck feels like.

The scar that’s there. One of the many scars that Peter *can’t* get rid of.

The spider-bite had come with a lot of costs. One of which being that Peter can’t make any new scars: they heal as if the injury were never there, any illnesses he contracts are taken care of before it ever shows. His immune system is pretty spot on.

However, all of the scars Peter had gotten *before* the bite? They’re still patterned onto his skin.

Peter remembers the day he got the bite in both crippling clarity and horrifying nothingness. The part where he got the very scar that’s on his neck is the part that Peter remembers all too well, and spends a lot of his time forgetting it’s there, for his own sanity.

It is one of the worst looking scars on him, after all. Not because of the size, or how prominent it is. But the location itself, and how it sticks out from under the collar of Peter’s

shirt. It's not a pretty sight, and Peter knows it. That's why he prefers to wear a hoodie if he can, because it's harder to notice it then. However, the raised skin certainly caught Dick's attention.

He doesn't want to talk about it.

"...Pe-"

"Look at this one." Peter jumps up to slap the ugly yellow hat on Dick's head, hoping his smile looks genuine. The hat covers his eyes, and when Peter moved, Dick's hand had dropped away. "This looks like something lame that you would wear."

"Lame?" Dick takes the bait- or maybe accepts it, whatever. His jaw drops. "You think I'm lame?"

"Old people are all sort of lame. It's okay, it happens."

"*Old!*?" Dick has now suddenly forgotten what to say. "I'm- I'm not old! I'm only 29!"

"That sounds old to me." Peter snickers, taking a step back and putting his own hat back on the rack. "Hey, Damian!"

"What is it?" Damian snaps (snaps? or is it just curt? Peter can't tell) from where he's standing. He's holding onto a nice brown coat, and Peter whistles as he comes to a stop next to him.

"Nice coat. Anyway, when do you think people get 'old'?"

He almost misses it, but Damian seems to stand straighter when Peter compliments the coat he picked out. He doesn't comment on it, instead keeping his face stern, if judgy about the question. "I would assume 'old' would begin around the ages of 30 to 40."

"Dami! No!" Dick falls to his knees- *falls to his knees*- and holds out his arm in dramatics. Peter laughs, trying *so* hard to contain his smile so Dick doesn't think he's gaining ground, and Damian wrinkles his nose in disgust. "How could you do this to your own brother? This is a betrayal like none other!"

"Get off of the floor, Richard. That is disturbing, and you are acting like a child."

"So I'm *not* old."

"That is not what I said at all-"

Peter hopes, for a little bit, that he had distracted Dick long enough for him to forget about what he saw. But after Damian led Peter for the light section, Peter could feel Dick's eyes on his back.

And Dick kept up the conversation easily, a practiced sense of normalcy. It was almost like they could pretend nothing happened, Peter could pretend that Dick wasn't watching his every move if he just ignored his spider-sense. But he *knew* that Dick knew something was

up, and Peter started to get anxious about it. He started to feel like maybe this was a bad decision, because what if they think *Tony* did this to Peter?

On the way out of the store, he hands over the lights for Damian to hold, attempting to grab the bags of clothes that Peter did *not* need that badly. But Dick stops Peter with a hand on his shoulder, snatching the blue coat out of the cart. Peter tries to say anything- '*It's not that cold*', or '*Seriously, you worry too much about it.*'

But he doesn't get there. Instead, Dick is tucking the coat around him like he did in the store, pulling Peter's hood out of the neck and adjusting the collar. Damian ends up having to help Peter get the tag off, and he doesn't miss the fond smile Dick is sending their way.

Why?

Peter doesn't get it.

He still doesn't get it when Dick insists on holding all of the bags, and Damian holds the lights, and Peter is left empty handed as they walk towards the hot chocolate stand down the street. He doesn't get it when Dick puts his arms around both of the teens, making sure they're by his side, underneath his wing. He doesn't get it when Dick asks Peter about the books he's reading in the same voice he asks Damian about his school project.

It's one thing to care about some kid that's going through shit. Peter knows that, he knows that they're vigilantes that are looking out for him. But it's another to treat Peter the same he's treating Damian, his *actual* family.

-

The street is crowded, and stuffy, and noisier than he expected and yet, Peter is having a good time. Shocker, really.

The hot chocolate in his hands has started to lose some of the warmth it had when he first got it, but he doesn't know if he wants to let it go. When he had ordered one for himself, Dick had insisted on teaching Peter how to '*order it perfect.*' That had included an insane amount of marshmallows, and while it's way sweeter than anything Peter likes, he somehow finds himself wanting to order it like this every time.

Babs and Jason are fighting over a game that looks like apple bobbing but they have to use a tiny scooper. "*More sanitary*" the vendor had pointed out. Peter agrees with that. Babs couldn't reach that far down in her chair so Jason is playing for her, but how *she* wants to do it, and it's driving Babs crazy and Jason crazy and the *vendor* crazy but they can't stop laughing. Dick is teaching Damian how to shoot a basketball- because apparently, Damian had never learned, and this was coming up in his PE course. Peter stands next to them, commenting from the sidelines. Damian is refusing to leave until he gets it right, and some part of Peter is sure this is because there is a huge bat-themed teddy bear that Damian wants but is refusing to outright ask for.

Peter watches the crowd with interest, every now and then scanning for danger. There's nothing, because it's just fun and games, but Peter can never *really* let go of the anxiety of it.

He keeps eyeing the Bats on the ground with him and pretends that he's only looking up to see the sky.

In reality, he can feel Red Robin somewhere in the area, can tell that he's somewhere around the rooftops. Whether it's because he's stalking Peter again or because he's also keeping an eye out for danger in such a crowded space, Peter doesn't know.

"There is something wrong with the game!"

"I'm starting to agree." Dick muses, leaning his hip on the side as the vendor picks up the discarded basketballs. "Those were all pretty good throws."

"Hey, I run a perfectly legitimate game here," The vendor doesn't sound surprised at the accusation, nor is he raising his voice. He just tucks the basketballs into the bag in front of Damian with a quirk of an eyebrow and a smirk a little too wide for Peter's liking. "If ya don't like it, ya can find otha games to play at."

"These are always rigged." Dick complains quietly to Peter as Damian throws the last basketball too close to the vendor's face.

"Hey, Damian," Peter claps one hand on the other boy's shoulder, and points down the street towards other booths. Damian turns his deadly glare away from the vendor and towards Peter. "There's a shooting game over there, wanna try with me?"

"Ooh, good idea, Peter!" Dick is all too eager. Peter must have walked right into whatever plan the man is forming. "We can-" Damian shoots Dick a look and Dick backtracks instantly. "I'll hang back with Jason and Babs, the street is kinda killer on her wheels."

That satisfies Damian. He nods shortly and Dick relaxes a little. Hesitant, Dick asks, "Stay in sight so I don't have a heart attack?"

"Understood, Richard."

"Got it, Old Man." Peter slips his hot chocolate into Dick's grasp, and begins to lead Damian through the crowd as he hears a "*Hey what?*"

"You could have thrown that away yourself. Are you that lazy?" Damian comments as they pass through a group of teenagers- all of whom smell like mangoes, suspiciously. Damian is harder to read than others, but Peter still has yet to really sense anything outright nerve-wracking about him. Though he does always sounds like he's disappointed in someone, or that he's above them.

Peter shrugs, flashing him a smile. "I didn't finish it, and he looks like the type of guy who wouldn't let it go to waste."

Damian considers this for a beat. "...That does seem like an... *adequate* reason. However--"

"Have you ever tried one of these before?" Peter asks, digging into his pocket for his tickets as they get to the booth. There's a couple people in line ahead of them, so they're stuck

actually talking to each other. “I haven’t been since I was, like, nine, so I have a feeling I’ll be rusty.”

“I have attended with Richard before a few times.” Damian tells him, arms crossed and his chin raised up. “If you need assistance, I will show you how to better yourself. You’ll likely need it.”

Not the way Peter would have put that, but he thinks that means Damian will help him out if it’s too hard? Peter nods at that, and something in Damian’s shoulders relax when he says, “Alright, thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Which fairs have you attended?” Damian asks, and it looks like it’s paining him to make small talk the same way it’s paining Peter too.

“Um... Not many.” Peter admits. “I last went to one with my aunt.”

“Not your parents?”

It’s curt, but Peter still answers. “No, they died when I was little.”

“Apologies.”

“No sweat.” Peter shrugs. “I was too little to remember them. But yeah, I went with my aunt. There was- There was a parade. I thought I’d be more anxious coming here, but it’s been nice so far.”

“Why would you feel anxious? Because of the crowds?” Damian, again, sounds more like he’s treating the conversation as an interrogation. His eyes are intense, his brows furrowed and his arms crossed like a weird 13-year-old detective. After meeting Batman in person and seeing Bruce’s face all over Gotham, Peter can see the familial resemblance.

No, not even a familial resemblance. He looks a *lot* like Bruce, just with far tanner skin and green eyes, a more hooked nose. At the moment, he and Peter are pretty much the same height, so he doesn’t physically loom over Peter, but his presence sort of makes up for that. It’s like he’s talking to Little-Batman.

“I guess that’s one reason...” Peter hesitates, glancing at Damian and finding the boy had hung onto that. The minuscule raise of a brow, and Peter debates his next reply very, very carefully.

He wouldn’t drop this on just anyone. But Damian isn’t a small talk sort of guy, and neither is Peter, really. He can be good at it if that’s what a situation calls for, but in this situation, it would probably frustrate them both to keep up this air of politeness. Peter can appreciate a blunt reply, and the straightforwardness that someone like Damian has. He doesn’t get to see it often.

“My aunt died at the parade.” Peter tells him, his eyes scanning the shooting game as the people in line lose.

The dinging of the toy gun pellets and the loud music from the speakers mix in with the noises of the city around them that grows more and more familiar the longer Peter is stuck here. Damian is listening intently, reminding Peter of a statue with how still he is.

“Someone knocked into me and I lost her in the crowd, right after we went to a fair. Wasn’t till the cops found me that I learned she had a heart attack and that’s why she couldn’t find me. So I try not to go to these things anymore.”

Damian is quiet, and Peter observes his reaction.

He thinks he chose correctly. Damian doesn’t give him a pitying look- in fact, it’s more of an understanding. No pity at all, and he doesn’t soften his voice when he speaks next.

“But you came today.”

“I did.”

He tilts his head; it makes him look a little like a bird. “If you knew that it would make you anxious, why did you decide to come? That sounds ridiculous.”

“I dunno.” Peter shrugs as they step up in the line. “I guess I thought it was worth it.”

“Why? It could have gone horribly wrong. That would have been a foolish decision.”

“You’re very blunt.” He sees Damian almost wince. Or his version of a wince, Peter thinks. His eyes crinkle and his eyes dart away for half a second before returning to Peter. “I like that.”

Damian stares.

“...You do?” He says, very much not believing Peter at all. Or, really, it’s in the tone that says if Peter is being serious, he thinks there might be something wrong with Peter.

“Yeah.” Peter grins, bumping Damian’s shoulder and it knocks him, but not enough to make Damian step back. He wasn’t expecting it, and he narrows his eyes at Peter. “I have a habit of skirting around the topic if I get scared of it. But you cut right through, that’s hard to do.”

“Not many people here appreciate that quality about me.”

“Many people are full of themselves.” Peter replies, tucking his cold fingers in his pockets. “...Where are you from? You didn’t grow up in Gotham?”

Peter can’t very well tell- Damian has an accent, but he speaks concisely and to the point, as if he had spent a long, long time working on his diction. But it’s not a Gotham accent like Peter’s gotten used to around here. Peter sticks out like a sore thumb because of his own accent.

“No, I am not from Gotham. I was raised by my mother in Pakistan before Father took me in.” Damian again avoids Peter’s eyes. There could be a million reasons for this, so Peter can’t decide what he’s nervous about suddenly.

“That’s cool! Which city? My neighbor in Queens- uh, when I was like, 10?- she was from Karachi city, she always talked about it when she babysat me after school. That’s near the ocean, right?”

“I grew up near Nanga Parbat, not near the ocean. But yes, Karachi City is on the ocean side.”

Peter has to squint to remember his geography. “Nanga Parbat... That’s... near the Himalayas, right?”

Damian nods, his lip twitching the slightest bit upwards. “Yes.”

“Cool,” Peter can’t believe he remembered that. And because Peter had supplied a personal story, he feels as though he’s allowed to ask (though, he’ll be fine without an answer), “Do you miss it?”

Because many people miss home, even if they no longer consider it to be a place they belong to anymore. Even if it isn’t ‘home’, it once was. Peter misses Queens every day, and he’s not as far away from it as Damian is from where he grew up.

Damian doesn’t answer for a few seconds. Instead, he watches as the person in line puts down the game gun and groans about losing. Peter begins fishing their tickets back out, expecting no reply, when Damian speaks.

“Sometimes.”

He doesn’t offer more. But Peter grins at him as they step up to the game. “Me too. Hey, I’m gonna kick your ass at this, by the way.”

Damian’s head whips back to face Peter so fast it looked like he should have whiplash. Peter looks down at himself to see if he caught fire, because Damian’s fierce glare felt like he had that kind of power. If Peter gets a headache in a few minutes, he’ll have to wonder if Robin is a meta and can make his head explode.

“What?”

Peter’s lips tug into an obnoxious smirk. “Got hearing problems, Damian?”

Damian snatches the gun from the alarmed vendor and slams their tickets down on the counter, snarling, “We’ll see about that, *Grayson*. ”

-

“I’m getting nervous.”

“Dick, if you do not stay chill about it, I guarantee you’re gonna fuck this up.” Jason replies. He’s too busy looking through the posters set up on the vendor’s board to really pay attention to what Dick is saying.

But Dick *is* getting nervous. He’s felt nervous since Peter showed up at the library earlier.

Peter has spent the better part of October avoiding them like they were water and he was oil. And then, four days to Halloween, he walks in and he actually chooses to hang out with them. Like. On purpose and everything. At the library, Dick was expecting Peter to run off after a little conversation. But then he accepted going to the store-

(Dick knows he took a big risk at the store, getting Peter all those clothes. But man, the kid has been wearing the same two outfits ((maybe three and a half?)) for the past month. And none of them are warm enough for how bad Gotham gets in the winter.

He just kept thinking about how chilly Peter is going to get, and then his mind flashes back to the water droplets that were in Peter's hair the last time they had spoken when he was Nightwing, and he couldn't do it. He couldn't leave without a jacket or two.

And somehow, that hadn't driven Peter away. Dick has a feeling the kid knew it wasn't just for his own sound of mind, but he had let it happen anyway. So the risk worked out, right?)

-and then accepted coming to the festival with them. Those are huge steps, he thinks. Like, Peter and them have been taking baby steps this entire time, and then Peter just *leaped* out of nowhere, and Dick isn't stupid!!

Something happened recently, something changed Peter's mind. Or pushed Peter into this. And he has *no* idea what it was. Because the last time Peter had interacted with them, he had bolted out of the doors after meeting Jason. Babs had her Theory Face on, and Dick had tried to pry it out of her, but she affirmed that she couldn't tell him yet, not until she figured it out fully herself.

So what was it? What changed Peter's mind? What if Dick says something wrong again, and Peter leaves, and he doesn't come back?

What if Peter is *looking* for a reason to leave?

He's going to develop hives. Or gray hair- After all, he's *old* now, apparently. God, he will never let Wally or the others hear about this. If any of them had heard what Peter and Damian said, they'd never let him hear the end of it. He's *not* old. He's just old in relation to where Peter and Damian are. Right.

That makes him feel better.

But, now, the nerves are mixed with other emotions. Things that are eating away at Dick like they want to melt him into a puddle of acid and angst- and guilt, for some reason.

That scar on Peter's neck had genuinely shaken him to his core.

He thinks he did a decent job covering that from Peter. Because the kid had done a hell of a lot to prevent a conversation about it right then. Dick isn't a stranger to being distracted. Honestly, *he* wasn't ready to ask about it, and he *knows* he would have anyway if Peter hadn't stopped him. So he's glad the kid shut him up, and he's glad that it all went smoothly from that point.

But he can't stop thinking about it. He hadn't even *meant* to see it, or pry. But his finger had caught on the indentation and he thought it was a tag of Peter's shirt or hoodie and then it was *too late* to pretend he hadn't seen it.

The scar wouldn't have been noticeable, if Dick hadn't felt it when his thumb traced it. On the tan of Peter's skin, the color is barely there, just a mark of white and brown that peeks out from underneath the collar of his shirt and stops just under his hairline. But the placement was- it was not a good sight. Peter would have bled a lot, and he would have needed help immediately, and all Dick could think about was *how how how how how did that happen how*.

He tries not to think about it, because he's scared that if he asks now, Peter will flee. And that's not what he needs right now, not after taking this huge step to talk to them and *hang out* with them. And-

"They're getting along."

Pride blooms in Dick's chest.

He was anxious about Damian and Peter talking, but he apparently had no reason to be. They're close in age, and Damian... does not have many friends. Or any, really, outside of his teammates. With how flighty Peter had been, he was worried that Damian's blunt way of putting things would have put him off. But Peter had rolled with it in stride.

Even now, Dick can see them getting along down the street at the game. Peter is smiling, bumping into Damian's shoulder, and Damian is *relaxed*. He doesn't even get angry about the contact. Damian had been suspicious of Peter from the beginning, stating that Peter had a lot more to do with Ohnn and the issue than he might be letting on. Dick has seen him biting his tongue all afternoon. But at the moment, there is nothing to worry about.

(It's all going so smoothly that it freaks Dick out.)

"They are." Dick agrees with Jason. It must be full of fondness, because Jason rolls his eyes. "Don't make that face at me, come on, Jay! It's nice to see Damian interacting with someone his own age for once that isn't on his team. How often is it that Damian does that?"

"It's a good thing, I hear ya." Jason waves him off.

"It's cute to see Damian actually be a kid." Babs comments, one hand holding her chin up and watching the boys as she picks at a bucket of cotton candy.

Damian is currently shooting at some targets and Peter is cheering him on... or, trying to distract him, because Peter is hitting his hands on the booth and grinning ear to ear like the cat who got the cream. When Damian gets a couple of the targets, Peter bumps into his shoulder again, covers his mouth with one hand, and holds out the other like he's doing a ridiculous cheer. Damian is making a face at this, but his shoulders are back like he's proud of himself.

“Look at that! He got a Damian smile. It took me *months* to get a Damian smile that wasn’t aimed to hurt my feelings.” Babs comments, and Dick winces. But she’s right. “It’s weird how much they look like cousins or something.”

Dick doesn’t miss the way Jason looks up at that.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That face you just made.” Dick repeats the face, gesturing to himself with one hand. “That face. The ‘*I Know Something*’ face. You made it.”

“I didn’t make a face, you’re reading into things again, Dickhead.”

“I have eyes and a brain, Little Wing, you can’t fool me when you’re being obvious. Tell me what you’re thinking about?”

Jason chews his bottom lip, casting a glance over at Peter and Damian. It’s Peter’s turn at the board now, and Damian is blinking at how many of the targets Peter is hitting. Which is... a lot, actually. Damian had hit a lot of them, but they hadn’t knocked down. Peter is knocking them over one by one and Damian is scoffing. Jason turns back to the posters, crossing his arms and giving his thoughts a good turnover.

“It’s just... Peter *does* look familiar. Doesn’t he?” Jason says this slowly.

And something flashes in Babs eyes as well. Jason and she carry a silent conversation, and Dick’s head turns between the two like watching a tennis match. Eyebrows raise, mouths thin, glances thrown towards Peter and Damian, then to Dick.

“*What?* What am I missing?”

They both look at him. And with a sigh, Babs says, “Nothing, don’t worry about it just yet.”

“Yet?”

“It’s a weird theory, and I don’t *think* it’s right, and I’d-”

“Like to take your time, yeah you said that about the other theory too.” Dick reminds her, and Babs shrugs. “It would be nice if you guys could let me in on your thoughts. Get a little team power going, yeah? Two minds are better than one, Babs. Or, actually, three, since you’re conspiring with Jace and not me.”

“I seriously think it’s a long shot.” Babs admits again, but her eyes are saying something different. Dick has known her long enough- admired her long enough- to know that she’s got something in her brain and she can’t get it out.

“We shouldn’t worry about it yet.” Jason reminds him. He’s pulling out a stack of money from his wallet that Dick is sure is double the price of the poster, and he’s setting it on the table for the artist to see. Their eyes widen and Jason just keeps adding bills without blinking.

“We should just make sure Peter- and Baby Brat- have a good time tonight, and he’ll want to hang out with us more, and that solves that issue. We learn more as we go along. Baby steps.”

“But-”

“Problem.”

Babs’ voice is sharp, and it takes little effort for them to snap their eyes back towards Damian and Peter.

Instead of at the booth like expected, Peter and Damian have started their way back through the crowd. Damian is holding on to the same type of teddy bear he’s been trying to get earlier, but it’s clutched in one hand that’s made into a fist at Damian’s side. Peter and Damian are blocked by three older teens, much taller than either of them.

Damian is what Dick expects, in this situation. The teenagers are looming over them, one has a cigarette lit between his lips and he’s attempting to scare them. Damian’s eyes may not be set on killing anymore, but it’s no less threatening. He’s seen Damian gut grown men with his eyes alone. He’s coiled, tense, ready to strike should he need to.

But Peter?

Peter has stepped in front of Damian. Whereas Damian’s upper lip has curled into a snarl, Peter’s face is calm, scarily so. He has the most impassive expression, as if he could flick the older boy’s forehead and he’d be gone. His hands are in his pockets, his shoulders relaxed, and he quirks a brow at something the older boy says.

Jason is the first to move. Peter is saying something, and the older boy puffs cigarette smoke into his face.

The kid’s jaw clenches and releases just as fast as it happened, but it was there. Irritation, anger. The only sign that he *is* angry. Peter’s eyes narrow, and reaches up and plucks the cigarette from the boy’s mouth, throws it on the ground, and puts it out under his shoe. He never loses eye contact with the older teen.

Dick hadn’t realized he was approaching as well, not until his own hand was pulling the older teen back by his jacket hood, and Jason was grabbing the neck of one of his friends, dragging him backwards. He puts himself in between his boys and the teens, voice low and steady.

“Do we have a problem here?”

A flinch from the teen, an angry glare sent Peter’s way. He gulps nervously, eyeing Jason and avoiding looking at Dick’s face. “Nah, we don’t.”

“Smart choice.” Dick claps a hand on his shoulder, squeezing tightly and feeling the teen tense up. “Keep making those. Now get out of my face.”

His hands reach for Damian and Peter’s shoulders, not turning to face them until he’s sure the teens have made their way out. Dick releases a tense breath as Jason complains, “Can’t even have a nice time at the festival without some punks thinkin’ they’re hot shit.”

“You two okay?” Dick is scanning for injuries even though he *knows* that nothing happened to them. But still, he can’t turn it off.

Damian scoffs, attempting to cross his arms until he realizes he’s holding the teddy bear, and settles for putting a hand on his hip. “We were fine, Richard. Those low lives could not even dream of putting us in any real danger.”

Dick knows that *he* would have been fine, but what about Peter?

Peter, who’s impassive look is gone. Instead, he’s got the most innocent smile on his lips, as if he hadn’t just encountered older kids who were likely looking for an easy fight. Sometimes when he’s under Peter’s stare, it feels like he’s being observed, like he’s taking a test and Peter is grading him.

“We’re okay. I knew you’d see us.”

It’s said with a lot of conviction, like there’s no room for doubt. And Peter, he’s smiling like he’s made a decision, as if something had just been put to rest. He nudges Damian with his elbow. “Hey, show ‘em what I won for you.”

“I could have gotten it myself-”

Dick doesn’t know what just happened. He feels like he was out of the loop- out of the loop between Jason and Babs, and certainly not anywhere near Peter.

-

Perhaps it was inevitable that Peter would grow to like these freaks.

Okay, “freaks” might be a harsh word, but Peter monologued it fondly. Maybe “weirdos” is more acceptable, but like, they *did* follow (stalk) him around the city and their usual demeanor makes him suspect that they are waiting for Peter’s permission (or for a good reason) to kidnap him. So ‘freaks’ (lovingly) does feel the more accurate term in his opinion.

He honestly doesn’t know what *exactly* did it for him, but Peter decided that everything is going to turn out just fine. It could have been the hot coco, or the nice jacket he’s wearing. It could have been the scar that Dick didn’t mention, or the numerable other instances that made him feel welcome. But it also could have been that Peter knew they’d have his back, and they proved him right.

Peter *loves* to be proven right.

He could have handled the situation on his own, duh. Because seriously, they were just some punk teenagers looking for petty cash. They hardly made his spider-sense sneeze, they were no threat to him or Damian. But the fact that they had been there within seconds of the problem arising? Everything just sort of... clicked.

Typical of Peter to need a threat of violence to his person to trust someone else. He should talk to his therapist about the pattern when he gets back.

Ahead of him is Jason and Babs, complaining that they didn't get a single prize. Next to him is Dick, who's messing with Damian's hair and explaining something about there being 'such a thing as too much hair gel.' Everything feels warm and comfortable, the most so that it's felt for Peter in weeks now. As they make their way back to the library and away from the Hallow Fest, Peter contemplates his next move.

When he had told Ned about being Spider-Man, it had been his first time *planning* to tell someone. With the Avengers- the only other people that know his identity- he hadn't planned that out. It had just sort of happened along the way of becoming a friend of theirs, and then getting kidnapped and experimented on.

With Ned, he had practiced for a week. He had a whole cool speech written out and everything. (He had practiced in front of a mirror, and FRIDAY saved him from the embarrassment of Pepper walking in his room and finding him doing that. That would have been *mortifying*.)

And when the moment arrived, Peter dropped the ball. Instead of being a cool, stoic guy that criminals feared, Peter ended up clamming up with stage fright, stuck to a wall, and said, "*So... I'm Spider-Man, by the way.*"

(As silly as that had turned out, and as embarrassing it is to look back on, that was his best birthday party in a long, long time.)

He's already proven to himself that scripts don't work well on him, he's a go-with-the-flow kind of guy. He learned from his mistake with telling Ned, who thankfully still thinks Peter is cool even though he shouldn't.

So.

How the *hell* does he tell the Bats his secret identity?

...He might already know the answer.

A *little* payback for their own identity keeping couldn't hurt, right?

Besides, Peter *wants* to have a little fun with it. Their reactions to things he does is priceless, and he has to make up for all the times he was lame and pathetic in front of them. (No, this has nothing to do with the fact that Red Hood is super cool, shut the fuck up.)

Sure, a part of him is still scared, but he imagines that that part of him will always be scared. The unknown is always hard to jump into, he can't account for every variable. But it really is time to swim in the deep end and regret it later if it turns out there *are* secret invisible sharks in the pool after all.

So what can he do? Firstly, he'd have to tell Batman. He is sort of the leader, and by extension, everyone would find out after he did. Plus, his reaction might be the funniest out of all of them. Maybe he could show up during a fight with Two-Face, or he could stalk Batman and Robin again and pop up out of nowhere. Or he could leave more sticky notes behind as clues when he stops crime, and they could spell out "PETER WAS HERE LOL!"

Peter bites back a laugh when picturing Batman's- or Bruce's, he should get used to thinking-face if Peter were to web him upside down to a light pole and talk about how 'dangerous it is for him to be out at night, Old Man.'

That's when he spots the library up ahead. He stops walking, his heart sinking.

He knows that they're going to see each other soon, either with Peter as Spider-Man or as himself, but he still, for some reason, feels... *disappointed* that they have to split up again. And they *do* because there is no way his master plan will come to fruition if he's at their house... houses?

Doesn't Nightwing, oh, uh, Dick, he supposes- doesn't Dick live in Bludhaven, or something? Do they all live *together*, or...? Whatever their living situation, Peter would end up getting found out in a boring, usual way, or as a repeat of Ned's reveal. And Peter wants his coming out (actually rephrase that, Peter) - his *reveal* to be cool, just *once*, at least.

He *is* representing the Avengers after all. Until Tony gets here and clears the air, Peter- no, *Spider-Man*, is their only insight into heroes of another dimension. If he looks cool, they'll *all* look cool.

Also- there is *no way* he's going to their house.

See, now that he for *sure* knows their identity, Peter does believe they're trying to kidnap him. He recalls a conversation with Red Hood about how Jason was the least likely to kidnap him, and that Batman was most likely. And that sounds right.

There's Dick, Jason, Tim, Damian, and Duke- and Stephanie, maybe? Who *knows* if there's another-

Hold on. There *is* another! The woman in the Batsuit that he saw the last time he saw Ohnn! Is she yet *another* kid of Bruce's? See? The guy has a problem, for real.

Peter isn't about to become another Robin, and he sure as hell isn't about to become another kid in their family. Not only does Peter have his *own* family already, he's also got a bad track record when it comes to that sort of thing. So it's a no from him.

"I should head back now." Peter pauses on the sidewalk, pointing a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the subway. "Curfew is about to start."

Dick stops midstep, foot hanging in the air. He turns around to face Peter, mouth open as if he wants to say something, but closes it. Then opens his mouth again, and closes it again. Damian pauses next to him, raising an unimpressed eyebrow at the older man as he flounders for something to say. Jason and Babs keep going towards the library, likely having not heard Peter.

He looks *surprised*. Had... Dick forgotten that Peter wasn't coming with them? Had he just expected Peter to tag along to their house?

...He totally did.

There's a beat where Dick goes to speak again, like he's about to invite Peter to his own kidnapping, but Dick shakes the thought away, putting his hands in his pockets with a sigh. He gives Peter a small smile, likely not truly happy about Peter not sticking with them.

"You shouldn't walk alone this close to night. Dami and I can walk you back."

"Are you sure?" Peter doesn't want to inconvenience them... yet. He supposes that his Spider-Man reveal plan will be an inconvenience. "It's a pretty long walk from here."

"Even more of a reason for us to walk you." And then, as an afterthought, Dick scratches his nose and asks, "So, where is your place?"

"Upper East End." Peter holds back a grin. Dick definitely almost forgot that he shouldn't know where Peter lives. "Near Atinburgh and Livingston."

"Oh, that's the street Benny's is on." Dick walks over, patting Peter's shoulder. At least he sounded more natural this time. He turns back to look for Jason and Babs, shouting "Hey, Jace!"

"What, Asshole?" Jason shouts back, spinning on his heel to walk backwards. He pauses, twirling a set of car keys in his hand and observing the three of them.

"Dami and I are gonna walk Peter home. Get Babs back safe and meet us back here?"

"You're a major pain in my ass."

"Sorry, Jason." Peter offers, and Jason huffs.

"Oh. No problem for *you*, kiddo."

"Seriously?" Dick flips him off, and Jason just throws his head back in a laugh and turns to catch up with Babs.

"Stay alive, would suck if you died."

Something about Jason's smile at this joke causes Dick's face to fall for a fraction of a second. But he regains his composure in order to wave Jason goodbye. "Be safe, love you too."

"I didn't-"

"You two ready to go?" Dick is already pulling both boys by their coats down the street in a hurry, chuckling under his breath. Upon seeing Peter's curious glance, Dick smirks, and he explains, "Jason thinks he's too cool to say it; he gets all flustered when we tell him that."

Peter looks over at Jason as they make their swift retreat. Jason is rubbing the back of his neck as he opens the library door for Babs.

When they're further away from the library and now into a dead street, Dick changes from holding their coats. He settles an arm around Damian's shoulder, who resists the touch all too

weakly for it to be a serious rejection. He doesn't manage to convince Peter or Dick that he doesn't want to, because he ducks close into Dick's side anyway.

Not wanting to intrude on that, Peter keeps a distance enough away from Dick's other side that is normal. He wouldn't want Dick or Damian to think he's clingy, that'd be weird of him. Dick's cool and all, but he's not Peter's older brother. Or parent.

Actually, sometimes, when Dick and Damian interact, it's a lot more like the two of them are father and son than they brothers. Dick fusses like an older sibling, Peter supposes, but it's just something about the way Damian looks at him, and vice versa. Damian listens to Dick more than he does Babs or Jason, as Peter had noticed over the course of the Hallow Fest. And Dick always keeps Damian within his sight, smiles fondly. It reminds Peter of when he was an unruly kid that Ben would smile at.

Peter is uncomfortable even thinking of including himself in that dynamic. He's just a friend, and it should stay that way. He's got Tony and Pepper back home.

(Tony's not a hugger, which isn't a bad thing. But seeing people hug like it's so natural would make him a little jealous. Because his dad used to hug him all the time, and so did his Uncle Ben. He can't remember the last time he had gotten to hug Uncle Ben.

... Peter misses Tony, and Uncle Ben, and that's why it's always awkward when he sees a family together.

He's the outsider, here.)

"You said you live near Benny's?" Dick asks him.

Now, Peter knows that Dick is aware that Peter lives there but of course he's going to pretend right now that he's clueless. However, his tone of voice... sounds like he's innocently digging for information. About Benny. And yeah, he should put a stop to that train of thought before it goes into Tony territory.

"Oh, no, I live *at* Benny's. I live in the half unit next to his, above the restaurant."

"Half unit?"

"It's sort of like a loft space? We share a kitchen and a sort of living room, but everything is separate, for the most part. It's all his since it's above the restaurant, but the bedrooms and bathrooms are separated by the hall that leads downstairs." Peter clarifies. "It's a weird layout."

"What about your Dad?"

Ah, there it is. They're always looking for info on Tony.

"Benny's a friend of his. Dad's out of town right now. Some work conference." Peter shrugs. Damian rolls his eyes none too subtly, but Dick misses it because he's too busy thinking really hard if he should be annoyed by this info or not.

If he was Nightwing right now, he would have gotten a real (or real-ish) answer. But Peter wants to watch them squirm, just for a day or two while he thinks up how to properly tell a bunch of suspicious folks that he's not a threat and is actually an ally and their friend.

"Oh, I see. Good guy, Benny?" Dick settles on.

Peter nods, laughing at the idea of the alternative. Benny looks like a hardass and acts like a hardass, but he's a real softie. Peter will see if they judge based on appearance if they end up meeting Benny when they get back to the restaurant. "Yeah, he's cool."

And then he adds on:

"You should ask him about the veggie burgers, Damian."

Damian side-eyes Peter, tensing up. "...Why?"

"Aren't you a vegetarian?" Peter tilts his head to the side, smiling sweetly. It was just a small observation he made at the festival earlier (he only ever had vegetarian safe food), but he had also learned that Robin is a known animal lover. Gothamites trust him with their pets like children flock to Red Hood.

"I don't remember telling you that." Damian narrows his eyes.

"I think you'll find my observational skills are unmatched." Peter teases, stuffing his hands in his pocket. They approach the subway station now, Peter skipping ahead of them to take the steps two at a time into the underground.

When he approaches the turnstile, Peter reacts more on instinct than thought or common sense. He hops smoothly over the ticket barrier, the New Yorker in him agreeing with the Gothamites that the fees are not worth the time. He nods at an older teenager who had done the same, and turns back to see Dick swiping a card into the turnstile with a small frown.

"I could have paid for you, Peter." He says, sounding and looking a lot more worried than disappointed.

"I don't believe in subway fares." Peter replies casually, taking a step backward.

watching... hello!

"Don't believe? It's not the tooth fairy, son." A new voice from behind him pipes up. Looking over his shoulder, Peter spots a tall old man with an unbelievably good mustache waiting for the train as well. He dons a dark trench coat, underneath which is a crisp black and white work suit. His face rings familiar to Peter, who takes a step backwards from the man and squints at him.

For once when meeting a Gothamite, Peter's spider-sense is at a silent on the danger scale. Somehow, that's more nerve wracking than anything else he could have gotten.

"Commissioner, nice to see you!" Dick greets the man with open arms and a brilliant smile.

Commissioner?

As in, Commissioner Gordon? *The* guy for the police?

The *corrupt* police? The Gotham, corrupt police?

Dick is hugging him? Nightwing is hugging this guy? Like they're old friends?

"Nice to see you too, my boy." Gordon pats Dick's shoulder with a friendly smile, and then shakes Damian's hand in greeting. He reaches out for Peter's next. "My daughter might have mentioned you. You're Peter, aren't you?"

Peter had been squinting at the man, unsure of what was unfolding in front of his eyes. But the man's eyes crinkle when he smiles at Peter, and his spider senses agree with whatever judgment Nightwing has given him, if the *hello! hi! mustache!* has anything to say about it. Also, *daughter?* He's only interacted with one woman regularly enough for that, and that's... Babs.

Holy shit, had he not known that Babs was *Commissioner Gordon's* daughter???? This *whole* time????

He ignores his reservations and takes Gordon's handshake with an easy going smile. "Yes sir, that's me. Nice to meet you."

"Just as charming as she said you were." Gordon says nothing about the rather firm handshake Peter had given him. "You all headed back to the Manor?"

Oh?

Peter can't help it- his eyebrows shoot up and he glances towards Dick. *Is* Peter going back to the Manor and doesn't know it yet? How often to they kidnap children for this to be the first response? How much else does Gordon know?

Dick's face drops almost comically fast. He covers it with a horrendously charming but loud laugh, waving his hands around. "Oh, no, we're just bringing Peter back to his place."

"They aren't kidnapping me." Peter adds with a big grin, and Dick clears his throat.

"Oh, I see. As long as you're back before curfew." He blinks at the two of them, perplexed. Damian shakes his head tiredly when Gordon looks to him for an answer. He adds to Peter, "And you properly pay your subway fees..."

"Oh, Commissioner. I'm a born New Yorker. I'll pay the subway fee when I'm dead and have no need for money." The train rolls into the station, overlapping Peter's voice. Dick smirks when Gordon just nods at him.

"He's certainly a character," Gordon says to Dick when he thinks Peter can't hear. The two adults step onto the train after Damian and Peter. "Reminds me of someone I know..."

"Who?" Dick asks. Gordon stares at Dick.

“...No one, son. Have you met Stacy and Andrews?” Gordon asks, gesturing to two folks Peter thought weren’t with him, but apparently were. They’re a pair of people who look a lot like lawyers, with their fancy shoes and plastered smiles.

“No, I haven’t. Nice to meet you, I’m-”

“Dick Grayson!” Stacy interrupts, snatching up his hand for a handshake with all the grace of a seasoned journalist waiting for a scoop- or a businesswoman going in for the kill. “Pleasure to meet you, I’m Stacy McGuire.”

???

As the doors close, Peter glances around the train car. Damian takes a seat next to an old man who’s traveling with a toddler in the cutest little frog themed bucket hat and boots Peter has ever seen. Damian has his nose scrunched up when the toddler waves at him. But that isn’t what caught his spider sense’s attention. He scans again, feeling the back of his neck tingle.

“Grayson.” Damian kicks Peter’s shin lightly from where Peter stands. “What’s up?”

He shakes his head, holding up a hand to wave it off. “Nothin’, just tired.”

“Uh huh, sure, and I’m Santa Claus.” Damian looks around the car as well.

Thus, Peter’s gaze catches on two familiar faces, who are ducking down in their seats and covering their faces with their scarf and hoodie, respectively. Peter claps his hands together, delighted by this development, and ignores Damian’s shocked “*Where are you going?*” so he can walk over and plop himself down in the seat next to a man with a wrist cast.

“Shoes, Lanky! How’ve you been, guys?” Peter grins, and Shoes curses under his breath.

“I *told* you it was that creepy kid.” He hits Lanky’s shoulder while he hisses under his breath.

“Aw, are you mad at me?” Peter pretends to pout, relaxing back in his seat with his arms behind his head.

The last time he saw these two, Peter had broken Shoes’ wrist and stolen one of their guns after telling them to shoot him, when they tried to rob Benny’s. Gotham isn’t the smallest of cities, so he sort of thought that he’d never see them again, but here they are.

“Get lost,” Shoes snaps, but Lanky sighs and leans forward to see Peter better.

“Hey, kid.”

“What’s up?” Peter holds out his hand. Lanky flinches but shakes his hand. “You two been gettin’ into trouble?”

“Nah, man. After we last saw yous, we’ve been chill.” Lanky swears. Shoes slaps his friend’s shoulder again.

“What is *wrong* with you? Why’re you tellin’ him our damn business?”

“Peter, you know these guys?” He glances towards where Dick is standing near the doors. Damian has his arms crossed and he looks not at all happy with the development. Dick is trying for a pleasant smile, but he’s eyeing Lanky and Shoes like they were going to attack them all. Upon seeing Gordon’s face next to Dick, Lanky and Shoes curse and try to shrink back into their seats.

Shoes points at Peter. “What the hell, you little freak? You know the pig?” He tries to whisper, but he’s bad at it.

“You wanna try that again, son?” Gordon sends a hard look Shoes’ way. It makes the man shrink farther into his seat, and Peter’s spider sense hisses: *cautious flighty not happy*. To prevent what could likely become an issue, Peter grins at Gordon.

“These are some old friends, no biggie.” Peter waves Dick’s suspicions away, turning back to Shoes and trying to distract him from Gordon’s presence. “How’s your wrist holding up?”

“Awful, thanks to you, *brat*. ”

“So you *are* still mad at me.” Peter sighs dramatically.

“Of course I am you little shit!”

“You should be nicer, like Lanky.”

“That’s so sweet, kid,” Lanky touches his heart, genuinely touched. “I try real hard, it’s near impossible in Gotham, hear? Y’know, I tell *him* that all the time, but he never sticks to it. He’s a grumpy guy.”

“It’s ‘cause he’s short.”

“Would you shut your mouth already? You’re gonna stink up the ozone layer with all the hot air you’re pushing out.” Shoes stands up from his seat and pointedly plops himself down in the seat on the opposite side like an annoyed toddler. Peter snickers and slides into Shoes’ old seat next to Lanky.

“You said you’ve been doing good?” Peter can tell that Dick is still watching them like a hawk, but Stacy McGuire keeps stepping to get into his view and chatting away, trying to keep his attention on her.

“Yeah, man, we both got jobs down near the docks.” Lanky tells him, pulling out a cigarette and a lighter. When it lights up, Peter makes a face and leans away, his stomach dropping as he tries not to think about how much he *hates* cigarettes, catching Damian’s eye. The other boy isn’t even *hiding* his suspicion anymore.

“That’s great.” Peter replies. “I’m glad for that. It pay well?”

“Decent enough. We don’t gotta do what we were doin’ before.” Lanky says. Shoes’ grunts impatiently from the other side of the train, but doesn’t make another comment.

??????????????

Okay, no, Peter knows what this means now. He thought Lanky and Shoes had been what made his spider-sense act up... but it wasn't. He looks around again as Lanky rattles on about working for the docks, eyeing every face he can and ignoring Damian as best he can.

Something is off.

something is off!

Peter's brow furrows as he looks down the line. There's another man that's trying to cover his face with his coat, but there's a group of people eyeing him. Everyone who notices him takes a step back, or leans to try and see his face better. Which isn't typical of Gothamites, because they all like to avoid paying attention to trouble.

It's a face he doesn't recognize, just some older white man, with slick back blond hair and green eyes. Again, though, this isn't what the problem is.

watch it hey look it look it someone there hey look it

"...nd Tomas, he was lookin' for somewhere with bigger money, like we had last time, but I said the docks was good enough for now, yknow?"

"Uh huh." Peter looks towards the other side of the car.

Now that he's looking, there's four people in the train car that look suspicious. They're wearing dark coats and have black and white masks on. Peter can't tell, because Gotham always smells like gunpowder, but he thinks the bulk in a couple of their coats are suspiciously big-gun-shaped.

bad look it BRACE!!!!!!

Peter's eyes snap up at the ceiling where most of the warning is coming from, and a second after, the lights spark out all along the length of the car. The train lurches forward with a terrifying rattle, metal screeching and grinding, mixing with horrified screams from the passengers. Lanky's body falls forward and Peter pulls him back into his seat before he can hit his head on a pole.

Slowly, painstakingly, the train comes to a complete stop. They're all left in the pitch black for a few tense seconds, then yellow emergency lights switch on from underneath the chairs and inside the tunnel itself. They flicker in the window when Peter looks out, trying to see if the threat is outside.

His spider-sense is acting like there's a threat outside, but he doesn't hear anything out there. No, it's not... Not an alive threat. It's something else, something that feels like it looms overhead.

"Peter- Thank god. Are you okay, bud?" Dick is right in front of him now, pulling Peter out of his seat and searching for injuries. Damian is helping the old man and his toddler and Gordon is picking Stacy up from the ground, where her high heel had snapped.

Dick's hands hold either side of Peter's face when he sees no visible injuries. He turns Peter's head side to side, trying to check his eyes and his temple. "Did you hit your head?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine." Peter is more surprised that Dick is holding his face between his hands than he is from the sudden stop.

(When's the last time someone did that?)

BAD WATCH IT RUN GET OUT

Peter throws that thought into the "*Don't think about it*" vault. There's the cocking of a gun and the four men from before get up from their seats. The blond stranger yelps when a man in a half black and half white suit emerges from the crowd in the back and yanks his arm. The blond stranger falls to the floor of the subway car.

The monochrome and deadly Fashion Statement presses a pistol to the man's temple. Dick sucks in a breath as he pulls Peter behind him, shielding him from the scene.

RUN worry BAD no no worried protect keep safe

His spider-sense is rattling around like crazy here, mostly in term of the closest person to Peter at the moment: Dick. But it also is talking about Fashion Statement. Peter sticks his head out from behind Dick to see what's going on.

When Peter first got to this strange world, a man at the bus stop had a newspaper. On it, there had been a face he swore he would recognize, because it's so distinguishable. The man had half of his face scarred from acid burns, his upper lip permanently pulled back and revealing more of his teeth.

Two-Face moves his gun to the man's shoulder and pulls the trigger. The entire car jumps when the shot rings out, blood spraying onto the ground and the bullet lodging in the floor. The man rips out a scream so loud that it sends a chill down Peter's spine.

Dick takes a step back, turning his body halfway towards Peter. He presses a hand on top of Peter's head, pulling Peter into his chest, as if to hide his face from the villain. Peter grabs onto Dick's jacket sleeve as he inches them backwards more, closer to Damian. They stop only when Dick is shielding them both from the scene.

But Peter can still see what's going on.

The rogue steps in the ever growing puddle of blood and drops the man onto the ground with an unbelievably impassive look. *mad angry horrified bad bad bad bad bad*- his spider sense hisses.

"Let's see how you fare in this trial, Deus Johnson."

get cliffhanged! ☆*: .o. o($\cong \nabla \cong$)o .o.:*☆

ANYWAYYYYS how we feeling folks? besides that you have to wait at least a week for the next chapter (HAHAHAA) my favorite part of this chapter is Dick's stupid witch hat, Dami being suspicious of Peter, and that Jason and Babs won't let Dick telepathically communicate with them (they know but they don't KNOW, you know? they can't prove it off of a hunch and that's driving them crazy)

Hi all, Light here! i just wanted to say thank you SO much for all the love and comments, they truly make our day! (personally, my favorite type are the theory comments. They always give us a good laugh)

ALSO! Please remember to regularly check the tags, this is an ongoing work so tags may change or be added.

between my left and right, one day i'd have to choose

Chapter Summary

“Young Justice?”

“Um, yeah?” Tim sounds confused by his question, and Peter pauses. He fucked up.

He... is probably supposed to know who that is, isn't he? Shit. He hadn't done any research on them, all he had seen was about the Justice League and the Bats. He really should have snuck into the library to do more research about this world.

“Ah. Right. Young Justice. I know them.” Peter recovers oh so smoothly.

“...You don't?”

Damn. Peter is never gonna catch a fucking break.

“I'm chronically offline.”

Chapter Notes

Heyyyy besties :3 forgive Erin for cliffhanger? Yes? Forgive?? <3

Anyyyywho! This is. A big chunk of a chapter. Would you believe me if I said, before writing this, that this wasn't gonna be a big chapter? I honestly figured around 16000, which is short considering me. But then it just kept going and going and now... It's 27,752 words. Approximate reading time: 1 hour and 51 minutes

Nearly 28000 words Σ(°Д °;) if you follow my tiktok i was gobsmailed this happened. everyone kept saying that i shouldn't apologize and yknow what i'll stop apologizing when y'all stop saying sorry for leaving essays in my comments. let us both be free cause neither of us mind it! (tbh i feel like i need to use my twitter more so i can better interact with y'all)

Also before starting here's a disclaimer: I don't know what a detonator or a subway looks like so i made it up. I had already written it when i realized I didn't fact check it and honestly we are not here for that type of accuracy so i didn't rewrite it

trigger warnings: minor character death, graphic violence, gun use, suicidal ideation/tendencies

Deus lays in agony on the ground, his jacket slick with his blood. His groans of pain are the only sign that he's still alive, otherwise, he is rapidly approaching a sickly color that cling to those near death. He clutches at his shoulder, curled in on himself pathetically. If Peter weren't Peter, he wouldn't have been able to hear that Deus, despite all of this, was managing just fine to exhale curses on Two-Face while he trembles in the shock.

Two-Face stands above him, observing his goons' handy work while lighting a cigarette between his lips. The older rogue puffs out some smoke as he stands watch over the subway car full of hostages, all too relaxed about the situation. It suggests an ease and comfort from years of causing panic and heartache that makes Peter feel like he hates this stupid Knock Off Cruella De Vil. He's kidding himself if he thinks he is even close to pulling it off.

You haven't missed much since the last chapter, is what that means. Peter knows that doesn't make the cliffhanger any better.

Two-Face had his goons begin separating everyone mere moments after he shot that gun and did his whole dramatic, scary one liner. Peter had kinda sorta remembered from the wiki research he did a while ago: Two-Face has a love for doing things in even numbers, or by the twos.

Yeah, what a *shock*. The guy named *Two-Face*, who's wearing a corny half black- half white suit, is flipping a coin absently in one hand, has a lighter that is also split in half with black and white, and is separating everyone into *even* groups of hostages, *likes* the number two! Who would have guessed? Not Peter.

Anyway, that's why Peter isn't as surprised when Two-Face has them separated into two sides of the car, rather than doing what was the normal for a hostage situation, which would be making everyone drop to the ground where they were and not moving, nor giving anyone time to *think* about moving.

Seriously, where did this guy learn to villain? An old cartoon? He's met villains and heroes with gimmicks (Peter himself is not an exception to this) but this is taking the fucking cake and throwing it out the window.

Peter is on hostage team A, as he so cleverly calls it in his mind, on one side of the stopped car. It suspiciously smells like someone spilled cologne everywhere to mask a *different* smell of rotting fruit, to Peter's dismay. No one is allowed to sit in the perfectly fine seats, no, they *have* to sit on the nasty ground. To someone raised in New York, this sounds like Two-Face wants them to contract unknown diseases and start a world wide zombie outbreak, but that'd be giving Two-Face too much credit.

Peter can only imagine what horrifying substances have touched this ground here, and are now all over his perfectly clean pants. This is the *real* crime here- Does Two-Face even know how expensive pants are? Peter has been budgeting pretty much his entire life, so he knows. Some obnoxious crime lord whatever guy doesn't care. He could probably buy himself a million pants, that rich fuck. Peter only has so many pairs of pants! A whole *two* pairs! Now

down to one, because surely, he'll *never* be able to wear these again. Not without thinking about these nasty smells and potential zombie diseases.

Mourning his better pair of pants, Peter glances up at Damian. The other boy squints at him in confusion mixed with not-at-all-hidden suspicion.

“What the hell are you pouting about?” He whispers like it’s a bother to ask.

Peter sighs too heavy for what he’s about to say. “I liked these pants.”

“You didn’t shit yourself, did you?” Damian wrinkles his nose with pure disgust, reeling back from Peter as if that wasn’t a joke. Peter, offended that that even *came to his mind*, sits up straight and glares in his direction.

“No, I didn’t *shit my pants!* What is *wrong* with you? Why would I shit my pants?”

“You’re from New York, you’re some punk-ass cowardly kid-” Damian lists, holding up two fingers. He lifts a third but Peter punches his shoulder and Dick shushes the both of them. Damian tries to protest while rubbing his shoulder, but Dick silences him with a glare that pretty much says ‘*Do you want to get shot??????*’

Peter waits a moment for Dick to return his attention to the active hostage situation, and then he whispers to Damian: “The emergency lighting washes you out.”

“*Take that back.*” Damian hisses through gritted teeth, but then pauses. “I don’t care about something that stupid. What is *wrong* with you?”

Peter has no reply because Dick is once again shooting them a look that says he’s five seconds away from taping their mouths. He sticks his tongue out at Damian when Dick turns away, then exaggerates a rude face. Damian huffs petulantly, crosses his arms, and turns his face away like he’s too good to stoop to low levels. That’s fine, ‘cause Peter is all about that life.

Luckily (or *unluckily*, because Damian is a little shit), Peter had been split into the same group as Dick and Damian. If Dick hadn’t come to get him when he did, Peter would have been stuck on Team B, with Lanky and Shoes.

At the moment, Peter is trying to forgive Damian because obviously the other boy has severe issues (Peter is such a saint), and gain a sense of familiarity with the entire car, putting it to memory.

Commissioner Gordon has enlisted Andrews’ help (lawyer number 2, for the folks that already forgot his name because he’s a background character) in calming down the civilians that are *actually* bothered by the situation. Peter thought that New York had a way of not giving a flying fuck about a situation, but even New Yorkers *care* when their lives are in mortal peril, you know?

But Gothamites?

They care, but more so in a way like ‘they stepped in dog shit on the way home after a bad day’ kind of care. They’re all quiet and going along with the situation, but they also keep glaring at the floor and grumbling about how this was the ‘worst time for them to decide to take the subway.’ and ‘of course this happened to me.’

And it had only gotten worse when the goons started searching people.

Peter is always aware that every Gothamite has at least one weapon on them at all times. That’s why there’s that buzzing of danger towards seemingly the most normal of people—they’re all willing to do what needs to be done in order to survive.

But *holy shit* Peter is gobsmailed when the goons hold out bags and the other passengers begrudgingly begin putting their weapons in them. For a minute there, Peter was sure he’d been knocked out and sucked into a dream, because they just kept finding more weapons to put in the bags like when a magician has those stupid cloths they pull out of their sleeve.

One chick had a dagger. *A dagger.* And she had tears in her eyes when she had to put it in the bag.

“*That’s vintage,*” She had claimed, one hand over her heart, as if she was giving up a coat. “*Please take care of it. I want it back.*”

And the goon had just. Given her a thumbs up??? As if to say ‘*no prob.*’

Peter didn’t think Gothamites could *get* weirder. And then they *do*. They certainly live up to their emo-namesake of a city.

Dick and Damian are near Peter, towards the front of the group. Dick had been torn about this when it happened. He tried to push Peter farther back into the group (subtle, Dick, really. As if that wouldn’t make Peter question why he wasn’t worried about his *own* safety or Damian’s as much as he apparently was Peter). That hadn’t worked because one of the goons yanked Peter back towards the front and forced him to sit down, smirking at Dick like he dared him to do anything about it.

Now *that* had pissed Dick off majorly, but he couldn’t go all Nightwing on his ass, not with this many people around. Instead, Dick settled for placing himself in front of Peter and Damian, making it where Dick was on the very outside of the group, Peter protectively tucked under one arm, and he’s the one closest to Two-Face and Deus, not Peter or Damian.

It’s actually pretty interesting to watch a vigilante work like this. Peter’s only ever seen it from his perspective, but it’s kind of *funny*, really. Because Peter knows, he gets a front seat to seeing them try to keep their identities straight. Peter’s never been on this side before; he had no idea how entertaining it is. Maybe this is what Loki meant that one time he said “*The Spider has a sense of humor like mine.*”

(He hadn’t gotten it at the time, because he was just laughing at Thor and Tony getting into a spat during a mission, and Loki just happened to hear him over the comms. Loki was the one that the spat was about, and yet he had been very casual about it all.)

Damian sits in front of Peter, balanced in his sitting position like a panther on a branch, waiting for the right moment to tear someone to shreds. He's impatient, obviously annoyed that he has to sit still and pretend to be "normal" in front of everyone. Every time the other boy shifts, Dick sets his other hand on Damian's knee, a silent gesture that says *Don't do it*.

It certainly doesn't help that he and Peter are sitting right next to that old guy, the frog hat toddler, and Stacey McGuire, all of whom Damian is clearly uncomfortable being around.

Speaking of whom, there's another interesting detail that Peter has noticed: Stacy is pale in the face and keeps looking over at Deus Johnson like *she's* the one in trouble and bleeding out. She attempts to hide herself from Two-Face's sight using the old man, but it's not very successful. And even still, she keeps trying to see Deus, folding her hands like she's praying.

This is also something that Damian and Dick had noticed. Their shared glances to each other and side eyes in her direction say a lot. (Peter takes note of this in his mental list of observations- the Bats likely knew about Two-Face and Deus, at least in some capacity. That's because the two vigilantes here shook off their surprise fairly quick, and have settled into annoyance or frustration, and a settled focus that just *screams* they're willing to take him down and make a cover story if they have to.)

On the other side of the car is Team B, the other half of the hostages. Lanky and Shoes had been grouped into this category, the unlucky duo. They're the only ones that Peter happens to know on that side, besides *one* other familiar face among the crowd:

Bus Stop Guy himself!

Bus Stop Guy is also stepping up to the plate. He's quieting down anyone who is actually worried about the situation, and shushing an older woman who is trying to fuss at Two-Face and using her cane to point at him. He's keeping up a pretense that he's chill, but he's sweating buckets, fanning his face every few seconds and muttering a prayer under his breath.

A little funny that the guy that had been there for Peter learning about Two-Face in the first place, is now being held hostage like Peter is in an incident *involving* Two-Face. Small world, Peter supposes.

Right, so. Peter looks up at the ceiling as Two-Face crouches down in front of Deus, puffing out another breath of smoke and prodding the bleeding man. Dick clicks his teeth, annoyed at the sight, maybe feeling a little useless to help.

Peter absently leans backwards into his side, only sort of paying attention to how Dick relaxes by a fraction and sets his hand on Peter's head, tucking him closer. He's still set very still like a statue, watching Two-Face and the goons with his eyes alone, sharp and clear, ready to attack and standing guard over everyone. He and Damian are much alike in that sense- they almost look blood related, the both of them a mimic of the other.

Peter is thinking hard about the situation at hand, and what he can do to help out on his own terms.

And by ‘help out’ he means ‘mess with the Bats.’

Because *come on*, man, what did we think was going to happen? A *serious* fight? Peter has had enough of those with Ohnn, he doesn’t need any other villain trying to make shit serious. That’s not only boring, it leads to Peter having to face the fact that serious = trauma. And he’s got enough of that, thanks.

This is what he was talking about ~~last chapter~~ earlier before they got to the subway. The chance to mess with the Bats before revealing his identity? It has miraculously fallen into his lap out of nowhere. It’s almost like divine intervention. Or an extremely relevant plot point that an author has been eager to drop for a while now.

Damian leans towards Dick, dropping into whispers about Two-Face. Peter is vaguely aware that Damian slips into some sort of code (Why? Does he think Peter can hear? Peter *can*, but is Damian catching on? Also, do the Bats talk in code a lot? Peter is also adding *this* to his mental notes), but he stops paying attention to them when the toddler next to Peter wiggles his hand to get his attention.

Peter lowers his gaze to the young boy and he receives a strangely intense look. However, this toddler is wearing a cute hat, and Peter can forgive the weirdness.

The toddler holds up a hand- seriously, he holds out his hand as if to say, ‘*One minute, sir*’- and reaches into his overalls. After a moment of clinking noises (*what* is in that pocket??), he pulls out a chunky, black, Batman themed pen. He holds it out towards Peter like he’s about to bequeath a crown instead of a writing utensil, blinking up at him curiously. When Peter just raises a brow, the toddler wiggles his hand again, more urgent than before.

Peter holds out his hand, keeping the same dead serious look on his face that the toddler has. The baby drops the pen into his hand, satisfied, and nods at Peter appreciatively. Serious business, the pen offering is.

What a strange little guy. Peter instantly adores him.

“Sorry, he likes to hand people things.” The old man whispers. He looks like he’s a few seconds away from a heart attack, and Peter can *hear* his heartbeat, so he’s worried the old guy is actually gonna croak right here. That would not be ideal.

“It’s fine. I like being handed things.” Peter tucks the pen into his own pocket, holding out a hand for the toddler to take. “What’s his name?”

“Simon.” The baby looks up when the old man says his name. He points at Peter.

“Dimon.” He repeats.

“*I’m* not Simon, *you’re* Simon.” Peter says, to prevent whatever identity crisis might be brewing. The toddler does not care, in a true turn of events. “I’m Peter, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The old man blinks at him for a moment. “I’m Charles? You... You’re a little weird. You from New York?”

“Yes sir, I am. How strange of you to put it that way, and out loud.”

“You’re strange. Can’t say it another way.”

They fall into a silence after that. Peter has half of his ear on Two-Face’s goons, the other half on Dick and Damian’s coded whispers. Dick will run a hand over Peter’s hair every time something is said between he and Damian that sounds pretty intense. Whatever they’re talking about, it’s probably what Peter is thinking: who’s coming to stop Two-Face’s plan.

Earlier, Peter had sensed Red Robin out and about at the Hallow Fest. That’s not very far from the subway, so he should be here already, probably regrouping with Batman. Jason and Babs had separated from them earlier, so that makes at least four vigilantes... Spoiler might be out too, but doesn’t she have a stab wound?

Scratch that, Spoiler is probably barred from patrol and stuff, if they work the way Peter thinks they might. If his teammate was injured like that, Peter would also beg them to stay down (even if this was a futile effort). Considering Peter’s small glimpse into Steph’s personality, this could mean she’s either at home resting, or she’s 100% out there right now. Peter puts her down as a ‘maybe’.

There’s also Signal, but he’s a daytime vigilante, and Peter doesn’t know enough about him to claim that he’d be here. However... there’s that secret Bat that Peter had met, that no one ever seems to mention. If she’s also with the Bats, then she might be around too.

So definitely: Red Robin and Batman. Maybe: Red Hood (this would be cool but it’s not like Peter thinks that because Red Hood is cool or whatever), maybe Babs (what is *her* secret identity?), *maybe* Spoiler, maybe Signal, and maybe the secret Bat, but definitely *not* Nightwing or Robin, because they’re currently stuck in the situation with Peter. And no Spider-Man, but that much is obvious as well.

above! close no far??? far??? close no both

His spider sense is sort of all over the place, but Peter gets the gist. There’s something the the subway tunnel itself that is setting off the alarm bells. Probably explosives. It’s usually explosives.

Despite the probably-explosives, the situation is looking fairly simple and cut out. It’s actually something that Peter might see in a simulation that FRIDAY would cook up.

(Every Thursday, FRIDAY and Peter run through simulations together in one of the floors of the Stark Tower. That’s where Peter gets to run through situations that are slightly more up to speed than his usual villains. FRIDAY helps him figure out how to use his skills to get out of them, like he’s playing a video game. It was Pepper’s idea, and ever since then, it’s all he talks about on Thursday nights during dinner. Sometimes, he uses the simulations to run through a potential Black Cat heist, or to figure out a weak point for Armadillo.)

With that in mind, Peter tries to think of how he'd approach the simulation... No, he tries to think of what FRIDAY would say. She'd probably inform him that he doesn't *need* Spider-Man to help out...

And she'd be right, of course.

Because villains? They can actually be *really* predictable. Especially when Peter read their wikis, and he has a decent memory. Trust, in just a few moments, Two-Face is going to start goading them, and telling everyone what his reason (complaint) is. Peter won't even have to ask or wonder what his motivation is for all of this. From there, Peter will be able to figure out his next course of action in no time, all because Two-Face can't keep his mouth shut.

"Well, look at the mess you've made here, yeah?" Two-Face toes Deus' shoulder with his boot, just to be an asshole. Deus hisses in pain, rolling over to get away from him. "Was it worth it?"

See? What did Peter just say? Here he goes.

"Was *what* worth it, you crazy freak?" Deus has the balls to snap, despite looking five seconds away from becoming a corpse.

"Don't play dumb now, Johnson." Two-Face holds out his cigarette to purposefully let the ash fall on Deus' face. "I'm asking if killing the mayor was worth all of this. I mean, surely, it *must* be. You're acting pretty confident."

"I'm confident 'cause I was acquitted, dipshit! That means I ain't did it, and I'm a free man!" Deus writhes on the floor, attempting to move away from the ash that falls on his face. Peter pointedly looks away, rubbing his right arm when the skin feels like it's burning.

~~*Don't think about that don't think about that don't think about that-*~~

"I didn't kill him, and they couldn't prove that I killed him."

"Well there's an excellent reason *why* you got away with it. But not because you didn't kill the mayor." Two-Face takes a drag of his cigarette. "You definitely killed him. The only reason you're walking around right now without the cuffs is because your acquittal was orchestrated from behind the scenes."

"*Fuck* you!" Deus spits. Dick's arm tightens around Peter's shoulders. "Someone needs to put you down like the sick dog you are. Ain't no one did anything to keep me from behind bars 'sides my lawyers. The prosecution had nothin' on me 'cause *I didn't do it!*"

"Is that so?" Two-Face hums like he's got an arsenal of evidence Deus doesn't know about yet.

And of *course* he does. Because Two-Face wouldn't set up a plot like this with no proof- Deus must be a fucking idiot.

"Why don't we ask your little girlfriend?"

panic fear loud

Peter hears Stacy McGuire squeak, feels her flinch and duck down as if that'll stop anything. His gaze shoots away from the floor and to the scene again. Two-Face must have directed his goons to find her, because one of them stalks forward towards their group. Dick leans over Peter and pulls Damian closer as the large goon pushes past them roughly, his boot kicking Dick's side.

The goon smacks Charles' head out of the way, tipping he and Simon over. Stacy yelps and tries to crawl away, but the goon snatches her arm and pulls her to her feet, on her broken heel. Her ankle rolls-

CATCH!

Stacy falls backwards, just in time for Peter to jump out of Dick's hold and onto his knees. He reaches out one hand to Stacy's back, preventing her descent onto Charles. His other hand catches Simon, who had toppled out of Charles' lap. Peter cradles his head with one hand before it could hit the ground as Simon lets out a startled cry.

The goon drags Stacy over them. Peter crouches over Simon and Charles as she does so, nearly getting the not-broken heel to his head. Stacy steps on Damian's hand on the way out, and Damian hisses, flinching backwards.

"This is- This- ridiculous!" Stacy protests, trying to pull away from the goon, but his grip is too tight on her arm. She leans fully away from him, dragging her heels into the ground. "I am *not* involved in this! I was just on the prosecution!"

"That's *exactly* the problem, McGuire." Two-Face hisses.

"You okay?" Peter asks as he pulls Simon out of Charles' grip and into his own lap. Simon wails loudly, clutching onto Peter's neck for dear life. Charles grunts, trying to wave it off and mumble that he's fine, but his hands are shaking. Peter reaches out one hand to the old man's, clutching tight, and is relieved the old man grabs his hand back.

Dick touches his shoulder, getting Peter's attention over the crying child. "Are *you* alright?"

"I'm fine." Peter pats Simon's back. The kid hiccups again, stuffing his face into Peter's neck.

"You turned out *just* like your father, who would have guessed?" Two-Face chides. He lifts up the barrel of his gun underneath Stacy's chin, tilting her head upwards. She lets out a whimper and tries to flinch back, but Two-Face grabs her face in his free hand. He points the gun down at Deus again, and Stacy goes still. "Evan McGuire, real *cocky* bastard. Thought he could get away with anything he wanted. *That's* what got him disbarred.

"One would *think*," Two-Face continues darkly. "-that children should learn from their parents' mistakes. Not repeat them."

“I-I didn’t do *anything* wrong.” Stacy insists. “I did my *job*. Don’t talk about my father like that.”

“I went to class with your father, that earns me the right to talk about him anyway I’d like. It just so happens that I choose to speak the truth about the kind of man your father was. He was a lying, cheating, man-whore who went around intimidating, bribing, and getting rid of anyone that stood in his way, all because he was a trust fund baby that wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Turns out the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.”

“What are you trying to say?” Stacy gets the nerve to push Two-Face’s hand away from her face.

“That you and your boyfriend killed the mayor, and then bribed your way onto the prosecution team so you could botch the case and get him acquitted.” Two-Face reveals, and Stacy falls still in her struggle to get away from the rogue. “That’s it- that’s the face you *should* be making. You scared, McGuire? You see fate catching up to you?”

Gordon and Dick make eye contact through the crowd. Peter squints at the interaction- neither of them look surprised by this information. So they had figured this out? Or they had likely been thinking *about* it. Maybe that’s why Gordon was with Stacy and Andrews today?

“Stacy, you did *what*?” Andrews’ eyes go wide- the dumb, dumb idiot. Gordon slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Be *quiet*, Andrews, he’s mad at the prosecution.” Gordon’s words cause Andrews to slap his own hand over his mouth when Gordon releases him, eyes wide. The younger man sweats as if he hadn’t thought about that, then eyes the exists like he would *really* like to go home now.

“Why does this even matter to you?” Deus snaps. “You’ve killed plenty of people, it ain’t your business what *we* do. You’ve been on trial more times than anyone in this damn car- you have *no* right to judge us!”

“Are you admitting that you did it? Is that why you’re getting so defensive?”

“No, I’m not! I ain’t admittin’ to somethin’ I didn’t do!” Deus shouts.

Simon flinches in Peter’s arms, and Peter holds him tighter, rubbing the toddler’s back and trying to calm him down. Charles, too, is trying to keep him quiet, trying to distract him from what’s going on. Something about the way the kid trembles and flinches when their voices shout makes Peter’s heart wrench.

“Deus, be *quiet*.” Stacy scolds through gritted teeth. Deus scoffs, laying his head down on the ground. He’s looking paler by the second.

“Yes, Johnson, be quiet. It isn’t your turn to speak. It’s *mine*.” Two-Face says, turning to Stacy. His non-injured eye narrows at Stacy, full of a contempt for her entire existence. “Here’s what’s going to happen, McGuire. We’re all going to sit and wait for Batman to get here, and when he does, we’re going to hold another trial. This time, you won’t be able to weasel yourself out of fair proceedings.”

“Fair? How is any of this fair?” Stacy argues. “You hate my guts, you’ve seem to have already decided my fate! You can’t be impartial!”

“Not that kind of trail.” Two-Face lets go of her face, digging into his pocket. From there, he pulls out the coin he was flicking earlier. Stacy attempts to step back as if the coin was a weapon. “You’ll get a 50/50 shot- my decision, or Batman’s.”

“That’s not *fair!*” Stacy cries, and Two-Face’s eye twitches. “It’s not fair! It’s not! You don’t even know my circumstances- you haven’t let me plead my case! You can’t jump to punishment before then!”

“Be quiet! You know nothing about the plan!” Two-Face argues back. Peter wishes Stacy would be quiet, now, because holy *shit*, girl, *why* are you arguing with an enraged gunman who hates your guts???

“She’s right, and you know it! You don’t have any proof, do you? You’re just a washed up *freak* with no future ahead of him! You’re gonna get sent right back to Arkham, but you fucking belong six feet under!” Deus sits up, and he reaches for the gun in Two-Face’s hand.

NO!

BANG!

Peter flinches, and Simon *screams*. He screams in Peter’s ear, sobbing and trying to cover his ears. Charles begs him to be quiet as Peter reaches his hands over Simon’s ears, but the toddler can’t help it now. It only gets worse when Stacy’s blood curdling cry manages to be louder than Simon.

She drops to her knees, crawling towards where Deus had fallen down again. This time, he had taken the shot to the ribs. Two-Face digs into his pocket as Stacy throws herself over Deus, his eyes cold as he pulls out a detonator.

Explosives.

It’s *always* explosives.

“You killed him!” Stacy cries, holding her hand over the gunshot. Deus is making a gurgling noise that makes Peter’s skin crawl. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and shutting out the bad memories of when Ben made that sound. He holds onto Simon, whispering in his ear that it’s going to be okay.

“I thought you said you weren’t involved with him.” Two-Face says, his voice clear of any sort of emotion. “You acted like he wasn’t important, you were just his prosecutor. And yet, here you are weeping over his body.”

Stacy has no reply for him. Peter opens his eyes as Simon bawls louder, clutching onto Peter’s jacket like his own life depended on it.

Two-Face waves the detonator around, showing all of them the shiny black metal in his hands. He hasn’t pressed down on the button yet, but at any second he can. The rogue doesn’t

have to look around the car to know he has all of their attention. Simon cries, and cries, and nothing Peter does can make it stop.

“We don’t *need* him for this trial. This is for *you*, McGuire. Fate is going to decide your chances, now. If you can’t plead your case to her, then you are going to die.”

Stacy sobs, trying to form words, but she can’t get anything out. Her hands are stained with Deus’ blood. Peter tries to shush Simon, holding his hands on either side of the toddler’s face. “It’s gonna be okay, buddy.” Peter whispers. “It’s gonna be okay. Help is coming. Do you like Batman?”

Simon isn’t listening- no doubt because he’s literally just a baby. How could Peter expect him to listen, to understand what’s going on? All Simon knows is that everything is loud and people are angry. What can Peter do-

“Will you *shut that brat up!?*” Two-Face snaps, turning on them, now, with the eyes of a wild animal in a rage. He holds up the gun in their direction, the barrel still smoking from the shot a few moments ago that *killed* Deus. Dick shields Peter and Simon with his whole body, and Peter feels a wave of cold wash over him.

!!!!!!*bad NO NO NO!-*

close hello we know!

Peter feels the familiarity wash over him, his spider sense loud- louder than normal, like it always is when Peter is in an actively dangerous situation and someone he knows is nearby. It’s not Red Robin, like he maybe expected, nor is it Red Hood.

Batman is on top of the subway car. If Peter focuses enough, he can hear the metallic jingling of some kind of device that Batman is about to use to enter the car.

And then just like that, all the pieces fall into place. Peter knows what he has to do, now.

Honestly?

Peter doesn’t know how he gets the courage to do stuff like this. That’s something probably lost to genetics that he doesn’t get to know. From the stories Ben would tell him, his dad was a mouthy little shit too. He had the courage to mouth off during a fight at bullies that had nothing better to do than make him feel small.

He bites his tongue, passing Simon off quickly to a bewildered Charles. The old man ducks over his kid as Peter sits up, making sure his snark is *loud and clear*.

“Wow, it’s almost like toddlers hate loud noises, such as *gunshots*.”

Dick’s horror is evident when he turns around to gawk at Peter. Damian, however, cracks an appalled grin, and he almost laughs. Dick grabs onto Peter’s arms, shaking his head at Peter, who doesn’t meet his eye, but Two-Face’s instead. He hopes that the rogue can see his contempt in Peter’s eyes, but most importantly, hopes he sees Peter’s challenge.

Two-Face stares at him, just as shocked as Dick and the rest of the subway car. “What did you just say to me?”

“Peter, no-”

“Did you make yourself deaf, shooting twice in a room this small? Blew your ears out?” Peter leans to show off his face to Two-Face, so there’s no mistaking who said it. “Or is it because you’re an old shitbag, you need me to speak up?”

“Peter-”

“Get up!”

-

Damian watches with keen interest as Peter attempts to stand up. He finds the strength not to laugh- even though Damian isn’t quite sure why he wants to. It’s a mix of bewilderment and confusion, and something that reminds Damian of getting close to solving a puzzle.

He never thought the other boy had it in him. Because, well, from his perspective, Peter is always running. Always hiding, sneaking around, lying to their faces. He’s strange, he’s a fool, and he’s, admittedly... not as annoying as Damian thought he would be. Though still plenty annoying.

It almost frustrates him how Richard and Barbara had been right- one proper conversation with Peter *had* given Damian a new way to look at the other.

He doesn’t like liars, he *hates* cowards. However, while Peter is surely lying to them all, he’s not a bad person. (Though Damian will say that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is a grey scale, one that Damian himself struggles with all of the time.)

Damian hadn’t been jealous, like he thinks Richard is assuming. It’s just that Damian hadn’t known what to do with the situation. He’s the youngest of them all (which still boils his blood, sometimes, and he hates that about himself), so he hadn’t seen this side of things. Damian wasn’t like the others, he hadn’t been *chosen*. He had been thrown into the family, only there by blood. The first person he had felt chosen by was Richard. (And that was his fault, for the way he acted.)

So he hadn’t understood what their obsession with Peter was about.

In fact, it worried him that they were just so sure that they had Peter figured out, personality wise. He would never admit it out loud, but he would like for his family to not die (again, for a few of them). He took it upon himself to be the one that kept his suspicion towards Peter, if only so that if they ended up wrong, their family wouldn’t be completely blindsided.

He’s just a *liar*, right? And no doubt, he’s a meta or super of some kind, because he’s always able to see where Father and the rest of them are when they’re following him. And the evidence doesn’t stop there, either.

See, just this day alone, Peter had pretty much *flaunted* that this might be the case.

The battery box at the library, he stopped the ladder from shaking under Damian, he somehow figured out that ridiculously rigged shooting game (Damian is *sure* this must have been the case), and, more seriously:

Peter had known the train was about to stop.

Damian hadn't lied when he told them that he'd continue to investigate Peter no matter the conclusion he found. He was keeping an eye on Peter (doubly so, when it sounded like he challenged Damian's own observational skills by claiming that his own was 'unmatched'). Not only had it looked like he sensed Gordon when the man hadn't even gotten close to him yet, but he had also started acting strange the minute the train had started to move.

He had been wondering if Peter was just uneasy about the people, or whatever excuse he could use to play 'devil's advocate' as Richard so unpolitely reminds him is important. Then, Damian was wondering if it had something to do with the two men Peter approached. Damian is fairly sure he recognizes their case file for petty crime, as Richard had done his research on the area near Benny's when he learned that Peter was staying there.

(*"Just in case."* Richard had said.)

And then that fucker looked up at the ceiling and *braced himself* before the train had even started to squeak. He caught one of those criminals like it was *nothing*. The man is tall and wearing a heavy coat and no doubt Peter shouldn't have been able to catch him with *one hand* while not even moving from his seat.

Peter is a liar, a meta, a potential danger. These are facts.

But he's also *interesting*.

Like he said: the conversation with Peter had revealed that the boy understood Damian in a way that others don't usually try to. He barely batted an eye when Damian allowed himself to be a bit more lenient and tried interrogating Peter. He was more honest with Damian than he had been with any of them in the weeks that they've known him.

And besides the fact that Damian happened to tolerate his presence, Peter had ended up surprising him immensely when those baboonish teenagers attempted to pick a fight. He had already succeeded that Peter was allowed to have a degree of trust. But then Peter had taken that cigarette and put it out so nonchalantly that it hadn't even registered to any of them what was going on until the cigarette was under his foot.

It was surprising, yes, but what it really had been was the key to changing Damian's mind about how he approaches the Peter situation.

Because it was *funny*.

He hadn't liked Peter until that second. That was the moment Damian finally understood why his family had been so invested in Peter. Now, he supposes it wouldn't be so bad if Richard or Father brought him back to the Manor and he became another annoying family member.

Not to say that Damian isn't still suspicious- but that it wouldn't be unnatural for him to be part of the family.

Peter's still an idiot, though. An idiot, but not a coward after all.

Because he is *definitely* already a vigilante.

Damian has his suspicion that he's about to get a confirmation that Peter is *exactly* who he thinks he is:

Spiderman:

- Close to the Jonathan Ohnn case
- Is a meta
- Is around Damian's age
- Is suspiciously similar to Nightwing

Peter 'Grayson':

- Close to the Jonathan Ohnn case
- Is a meta
- Is Damian's age
- Is suspiciously similar to Richard

He might as well be waving a flag around that says "*I'm Spiderman!*"

Richard pulls Peter down to the ground, preventing him from getting to his feet. "Harvey, please-"

"Be quiet and don't interfere." Two-Face snarls, not liking the use of Harvey's name. "The boy wants to say something, so he's going to. *Get up!*" He barks again at Peter. Richard holds onto Peter's arm as long as possible, and Peter briefly pauses in front of Richard to smile at him. It's like he's just going up to the front of the classroom for a presentation, rather than standing next to a madman with a gun.

"It's gonna be fine."

Richard is entirely displeased with this outcome, preventing himself from leaping forward and taking Peter's place only because Two-Face has been even *more* unpredictable as of the last few years. In this case, Two-Face personally knew Evan McGuire, and no doubt he was infuriated to see a legacy of the man get away with making a mockery of the judicial system.

One of the goons grabs Peter's arm, pulling him away from their group and shoving him in front of Two-Face. The rogue's nostrils flare with indignant fury, waving the gun around recklessly.

"Go on, kid. There must be something you want to say to me, right? I can't imagine why else you would choose to open your mouth." Two-Face asks, his voice dangerously level. Peter makes unflinching eye contact, just as he had earlier this night with those teenagers.

Prove me right, damnit. Damian glares at Peter's back. *I know what you are.*

"Well, no, I didn't have anything to say." Peter muses, putting his hands in his pockets. "I was just pointing out that you were mad at a baby for doing something that babies do. Seems a little fucked up."

He also just murdered a man in front of all of them, but sure, Peter 'Grayson', that makes total sense.

"But whatever, man. You're the guy with the detonator. As ill-advised as *that* is. They tell you not to run with scissors for a similar reason, you know." Peter shrugs, glancing at the device in Two-Face's hands, and then back to the man. "Can I ask *why* you decided on this? Is it because you were having a bad day? I'd recommend therapy."

"You've got to be kidding me." Richard puts his head in his hands.

"Why would I put hundreds of people in mortal peril because I had a *bad day*?" Two-Face tries to sound annoyed, but it comes out as more befuddled.

"Bad week?"

"No, you moron-"

"Bad month?"

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"Does your tummy hurt?" Peter pats his own stomach. "I get that, 'cause I mean, I get stomach cramps sometimes and I hate that a lot. But you know people are *joking* when they say their stomach hurts bad enough that they consider world domination, right?"

There's something about watching Peter be so unshaken by the situation, so calm in the face of a rogue despite being a civilian, that makes Damian wonder who any of his ridiculously blinded family hadn't noticed what Damian is seeing right now. *Seriously*. They'd had how many encounters with Peter both in and out of suit? They'd seen him get into several dangerous situations, seen him clam up about his past and his living circumstances, etc, and none of them thought 'Peter could be Spiderman'?

It *has* only been less than a month since they met Peter, and they don't see him every single day- they were on a rotating schedule of just patrolling around where he's been staying, and only recently had they tried approaching him out of suit. But *still*. There's been more than enough proof.

Isn't this moron allergic to peppermint? *Like spiders are?*

Richard opens his mouth to stop- well... either Two-Face or Peter. Could be trying to stop Two-Face, but at the moment, Peter looks like the crazier one. But Damian holds out his hand to stop him. Annoyance flickers across Richard's face, and he shoots Damian a questioning glance.

He understands why. Not only is Damian completely aware that Richard holds some strange parental urge to take care of Peter, but Peter is also in danger right now.

(Seriously, Damian would have to magically lose his brain in order to miss how Richard is acting. Not that Richard is noticing it himself.

Not only is Richard constantly fretting over Peter's well being, he's got it in his mind already that Peter is theirs. Richard looks at Peter like he's important, and actually managed to forget that Peter wasn't going home with them after one day of 'bonding.' He also managed to pick out a coat that *matches* Richard's current coat.

It's bad enough that Richard has been non stop about Peter since they learned his last name is "Grayson" ((Damian has his *own* theory about that)), but now he's subconsciously making Peter match him. Damian himself barely got out of this- he had to threaten bodily harm if Richard made him wear matching t-shirts.)

They should be putting a stop to an untrained civilian talking to the rogue that had just made sure everyone knew that he's feeling particularly homicidal this time. They're the ones that have been trained for this type of situation, not Peter (this is to be confirmed. He could or couldn't, but Richard doesn't know there's an option). Father would surely agree that getting Peter out of Two-Face's radar is the best course of action.

And surely, if any of the other vigilantes found out that Peter had put himself into danger, they'd already be lining up a lecture for him, hypocritical or not. They've grown fond of Peter and they would hate to lose someone else, like they've lost people before.

But Damian?

He wants to see where this is going.

Peter is Spiderman, Damian has no doubt about that in his mind now. That only leaves *one* conclusion to make, really. Damian has to help Peter with whatever harebrained plan he managed to cook up while a child was screaming in his ear.

Damian *has* to see it through, if only to get a read on the boy that is *so* confusing to him. He'd been *so* sure, this entire time, that Peter was holding something back, hiding from them. And he'd also been sure that Spiderman was trained like he was. Not by the League, but by someone else, and surely by an assassin at some point. He'd been wanting to meet Spiderman since he first saw him, and to find out that he'd been closer than they thought, the entire time?

He wants to see what makes Spiderman, what makes *Peter*, tick.

And if anyone has a problem with Damian helping Peter by holding back Richard from butting in, he'll claim that they *wanted* him to make friends, and now they're mad he made one?

"Get to your point, stop beating around the bush." Two-Face chides.

“Sure, my bad, my bad.” Peter clears his throat. “...How do I put this...? Why choose explosives and hostages, if your issue is personal with Miss McGuire and her boyfriend?”

Two-Face points his gun towards McGuire. The woman has steadily lowered her sobs, and now she stares at Deus’ face in silence, unseeing of the world around her.

Damian hadn’t expected McGuire to actually *love* Deus.

In their research, trying to catch up to Two-Face’s plan, they had to dig into Deus’ life. In that time, they had uncovered his affair with McGuire, a woman with a fiancé. Deus has traits that lead towards being a psychopath, but what he feels for McGuire is something akin to love. He actually adored her, would do anything for her.

Which is why Gordon was going to investigate McGuire and Andrews tonight, to get evidence that she had botched the persecution for him, after doing exactly what Two-Face said she did. But that was because as vindictive and cunning as McGuire is, she always repays her debts. However, seeing her now...

She holds him like she loves him. Like he was someone important.

“We aren’t just here to talk about McGuire and her wrong doings. When you display a root of one problem, it exposes the *sickness* that lays underneath it, hiding from the rest, *feeding* off of itself.”

“You mean the people that let Miss McGuire get away with what she did?”

“Exactly.”

“But then why not go after them?” Peter frowns at him. “...I don’t think that’s what you’re doing here. I don’t think you want *justice*. You just want to be angry.”

His eyes are steely and cold as he glares up at the man that used to want exactly that- justice. The old friend of Father, who actually wanted to make Gotham a better place, one court case at a time.

Damian sees Peter glance behind him for a second, and his own eyes snap towards the top of the car behind Peter. Sure enough, a circle is cut through the roof, and the metal is pulled back with a grinding noise that screeches through the car. Two-Face turns Peter around in a flash, pressing the .22 caliber against the back of Peter’s head. Batman drops down into the subway car, fists clenched, silent and imposing as always.

It was a split second, but Batman and looked towards their hostage group. Specifically, he looked at Damian and Richard.

That split second is all it took for Damian to understand that he’s disappointed.

Damian doesn’t know *how* long he was watching, but somehow, he has the idea that he’s going to be in trouble later. Like Father just somehow already knew that Damian had stopped Richard from cutting in and stopping Peter from making things ‘worse’ for himself.

...Damian will have to deal with the consequences later. For now, he's going to see what Peter is made of.

Peter does look displeased with the outcome, but not overly panicked, like any good 14 year old citizen hostage should be. He's *trying* to look like he's panicking about being held at gunpoint, but at least Damian, Richard, and Father could see right through it. He holds both of his hands up, like he's surrendering, but he's just grimacing.

"...Two-Face."

"Nice of you to show up, Batman." Two-Face mocks. Batman looks towards McGuire and where she holds the dead Johnson's hand. "You're a little too late for him. But I think we still got a chance for the rest, don't we?"

"Let's talk about this before we do anything else rash. No one else needs to be hurt." Batman is calm, determined, and it contrasts Two-Face in this moment. The man who used to be Father's friend is an imitation of the man he used to be, a destructive glint in his eyes. Batman's lips press into a thin line, already aware that Two-Face isn't as in the mood for talking this out as he is trying to be.

Usually, Dent *is* easier to talk to. He has a lot to say, always wanting to make a change. If he wasn't at the whim of that coin or his own trauma, he'd have made a difference that Gotham needed.

"Why are we here?" Batman asks. "I hardly doubt that you believe I wasn't already aware of McGuire's wrong doing regarding the case."

"And what were you planning to do about it?" Two-Face counters. "What you always do?"

"It isn't my job to play judge."

"No, you just throw everyone into the broken system, letting us crawl right back." Two-Face pulls Peter back, the gun dipping lower to rest on the side of his neck. Peter gulps when the cold metal presses down. "You let people like McGuire take charge. You don't weed them out until it's too late."

Damian watches as Peter leans *towards* the gun hand.

"Did that coin already make your decision?" Batman asks, and Two-Face's gun hand twitches. "Innocent lives for your own vindication? Why are you risking yourself like this, Harvey?"

Two-Face doesn't reply to the question, in fact, he ignores it completely.

"Right now, there are multiple explosives set along the stretch of the underground. I have the detonator right here." Two-Face shakes the hand with the detonator. Peter's gaze casts towards that side without moving his head. Had he heard Two-Face move his hand? It wouldn't have made any noise. Just what *is* that power that allows Peter to do that? "If

anyone makes a wrong move, or doesn't play along like they need to, then I'm setting them off. And it won't just be the people in this car that will die."

Batman hasn't moved his gaze from Two-Face, or if he has, it wasn't a visible movement. The stakes are too high to just rush forward and take him out. Peter's too close, and they're stretched too thin. If only he wasn't stuck playing civilian, he could be *doing* something. But no, he has to sit idly by.

For the last two years, Two-Face has been spiraling. Each plot of his dances closer and closer to self annihilation, standing on the precipice of true suicidal ideations. When Father was lost in the time stream, Two-Face had been one of the few rogues that knew it wasn't him, but Richard, in the Batman suit. Though he didn't know it was *Richard*, just that someone else was in his costume.

"What are your demands?"

They knew that he'd been losing himself more and more to this persona he created, losing the person that was Harvey Dent. But Batman has always tried reasoning with Two-Face before hurting him. Every time, without fail, Two-Face lets him down.

"Tell me what you know. Tell everyone here what you found out."

Batman thinks it over- no, likely, he's made his choice, and is working through what exactly to say that won't set Two-Face off into more of a rant.

"Stacy McGuire's mother, Juliet McGuire, is running for mayor in the next election. She asked the mayor to step down from the running and to endorse Juliet to his voters, because he had the backing and the likeability. He was one of the few in office that was working for the people. He refused."

Batman looks down at Stacy. Her hand has stilled from petting Deus' cold face.

"McGuire and Deus have been together for two years. He worked as a hitman when he was younger, and he was more than happy to help Stacy. He believed she was going to leave her fiance and they would get married. So he killed the mayor for her. Stacy was going to make true to her promise, which is why she bribed her way onto the prosecution and worked systematically to get evidence against Deus thrown out, and his defense was also approved by Stacy. They both worked for her. He was acquitted because of the lack of evidence, and he was going to change his name and face so he could start over with her."

Two-Face scoffs bitterly.

"There's a list of names of all the people that McGuire had at her beck and call." Two-Face tells him, a dangerous light in his voice that Richard once told him sounds far too much like the Harvey Dent that was close to putting someone behind bars. "I took the liberty of... rounding up the ones that I could get. And then I got more for you. They're waiting on your choice."

“My choice?” Batman asks, though he already knows the answer. Two-Face often forces him to make a decision like this.

“Either you choose to save the souls on this train, like this snot-nosed *brat*, here.” Two-Face hisses in Peter’s ear, digging the barrel under his jaw. Peter winces at the sharp pain, but he bites his tongue. “...Or I’ll tell you where to find those big fish that are swimming in that sea of their own filth, and you can save them. You choose who’s more important.”

“And why would I make a choice like that?”

“Because that’s what you *do*.” Two-Face insists. “You make that choice every time you don’t kill us, Batman. What were you going to do, when you outed McGuire? Hm? Just send her into the prison system, like she don’t got the money, the affairs, the influence to get right back out? Sure, she won’t practice law again, but she’ll get to keep her life. And she’ll ruin others on her way.”

Inane ramblings of an inane man. Damian hardly believes that this is about McGuire at all. It sounds more like Two-Face is getting tired of being alive, and he’s chosen a case that reminds him that he’ll never get to go back to his past, will never be able to be who he once was.

“Killing these people won’t solve anything. I know you want to make a change in the system, but this isn’t justice. It’s revenge.”

“It’ll make damn sure they can’t keep pulling the strings.”

“Or it’ll create a power vacuum for someone else to fill, Dent. You know as well as I do that with McGuire’s people gone, there’s more than enough people in power that will just take her place.”

“You’re stalling.” Two-Face points out with a low growl. “I did you a *favor*, finding all of those weasels for you. I’m practically serving them up on a silver platter, and for what? Just so you can ignore me? Ignore why this was needed? The choice *shouldn’t* be *difficult*! So make your choice, Batman!”

Two-Face is screaming again, his thumb twitching towards the button on the detonator. Peter tenses up, eyes growing wide. Besides Damian, Richard sits up, almost in a runner’s start. Damian supposes this isn’t like before, and that he wouldn’t be able to stop Richard if Two-Face decides to-

“Unless you want me to make it instead. That what this is? Trying to make me look like the only bad guy?” He rambles, his speech almost slurred. He’s sweating in his delirium, an almost hazy quality about him. When his gaze lands on Peter, it’s as if he’s remembered the boy is there again. Peter, though he doesn’t *see* Two-Face’s attention has fallen on him, falls still.

And *there*.

Damian *loves* to be proven right.

It's the exact posture that Damian himself learned from his own training, with the League of Assassins. Loose shoulders, arms raised at the sides, above the hips- just slight, so the opponent won't be able to prepare for you to strike- and feet shoulder width apart. His fingers twitch, ready to turn around and take the weapon out of Two-Face's hands at any second. It's like he knows what Two-Face is about to say, just as well as the three *other* vigilantes on board are.

"How 'bout I start with this one?" Two-Face offers. He leans his head back, the emergency lights flickering overhead. There's a buzz of tension. No one has forgotten the corpse already on the floor.

Richard places his hands on the floor, ready to push off, Batman be damned, to save Peter. Damian wants to scream that Peter doesn't need it, that he's *right*, that Peter is Spiderman and this isn't as dangerous as they think it is.

"Let's toss a coin for it." Two-Face laughs.

"That's not what you wanted."

Damian has worked alongside his Father for a while, now. It took just that long of a time to be able to read him while he's in the cowl. He changes much about himself, even down to his silhouette. However, even a Damian from a year ago would be able to tell that Batman was *angry*.

It's startling enough that both Richard and Damian both react- Batman doesn't *get* angry. Not unless someone has crossed a line too close to family. Peter looks at him with wide eyes, as if he too had been able to hear it.

"Release half of the hostages, show some good faith." Batman offers, the anger washed away as soon as it had appeared. "If you want to give me those names, that's *my* demand."

"That's not how this works."

"That's what you're getting." Batman's word is like a stone wall. No one can get past this wall- it's built too high, it's made too heavy. It's guarded by only one man, but no one dares get too close.

Two-Face's jaw clenches, staring Batman down as he mulls this over. It's a tense few seconds where everyone, especially Richard, believes he's going to pull the trigger anyway.

"Fine."

The passengers perk up at this, looking towards each other as they contemplate what this means for everyone. No one dares to utter a word, not with those goons still armed and dangerous. Two-Face lazily points towards the group that Damian and Richard are in with his gun hand.

"That group can leave. You," Two-Face nods at one of the four goons. The man stands up straighter with the rogue's eyes on him. "Let them off. *Just* their group. If anyone else

moves,” He directs this order to the rest of his men as well. “-shoot them on the spot.”

What?

No!

They can't leave *now*. He can't see what Peter is up to if he isn't *here* to keep an eye on him! That was the whole point of stopping Richard- letting Peter play out whatever the hell he is doing and getting answers! And there's no way that Richard will let him interrogate Peter when they get off, he's gone soft to whatever spell Peter has that makes people like him so easily.

But there's not a chance that Damian can get out of this. If he puts up a fight to stay on the train, that's even *more* suspicious. Besides...

Loathe as Damian is to admit it right now, their new job is to help out these hostages, then try to double back. Or at least help Timothy disarm the bombs, as no doubt, that's what he's having to do. Damian doubts that Batman didn't already know full well that Two-Face had taken McGuire's associates- they had evidence already that Two-Face was occupying warehouses, they had gotten that when they followed after him a few nights ago.

Which means that Red Hood, Black Bat, and Signal are likely on their ways to these warehouses, or already there. Leaving Red Robin to deal with the bombs.

The man walks over to the train doors, pulling out a burner phone, likely to whoever is operating the train. After a beat of tense silence, the doors slide open and out into the tunnel. The goon raises his gun as a warning, then nods towards the woman closest to the door. “Get.”

She complies immediately. Their group is shuffling off in a hurry, guided by the goon. Damian looks back to Batman for an order, however Batman doesn't look their way. He remains steadfast, hands at his side, daring Two-Face to try anything to the hostages that are leaving.

With his plan in mind- there's no doubt that Richard would at least let *him* go, if he wants to keep an eye on the potentially suicidal Peter-, he stands to get off of the train. But Richard hesitates when it's their turn.

Damian sees the problem almost instantly.

Peter is still in Two-Face's hold. He isn't being released with them.

“The fuck're you doin'?” The goon hisses at the two of them. Damian elbows Richard's side.

“Richard,” He whispers, and Richard only half-looks his way, torn between going and staying, or fighting for Peter to come with. “He's going to be okay.”

“Go now.” Batman says, his back turned towards them. Richard's fist clenches, glaring at the back of their Father's head. Damian contemplates what will happen if Richard actually decides ‘fuck it’ and stays, but it doesn't happen.

Richard pulls Damian off the train. When Damian looks back inside as the doors close, Two-Face is throwing Peter to the ground.

-

Peter lets himself hit the ground with a thud. The impact shudders through his knees, but he doesn't get any time to recover and get up on his own. Someone snatches him by his jacket hood like it's the scruff of a cat, pulling him away from Two-Face and into the Team B's group. More than a few people hover over him, and a familiar voice hisses in his ear:

"What the *fuck* were you thinking, you crazy brat?"

"Heyyyyy, Shoes." Peter grumbles.

"You're fucking crazy, do you have a god damn death wish? Do you have any next of kin I gotta notify? I'm not a mandated reporter, but at this point, I'm starting to think I gotta tell *someone* you're trying to get yourself killed. Fucking idiot."

"You got *so* lucky he didn't kill ya then and there," Lanky agrees with Shoes' pointless rambling.

Peter thinks this is a bit of an overreaction, but whatever. It's not like this time, he told someone to shoot him.

(And even when he *did* tell Lanky to shoot him, that had been when Peter was sure the guy didn't have any bullets. He's sure that counts for something on the 'Not so Crazy and Reckless' scale he has, that no one else seems to be aware of.)

Peter is still hunched over himself, hand buried in his jacket pocket. Peter worriedly looks over his shoulder, only to find that Batman has all of Two-Face's attention, just as Peter hoped. That's good, because the next part of Peter's plan requires going under the radar rather than hiding in plain sight.

"Kid? Are you hurt?" The man that had pulled him into the group asks, and Peter looks up at Bus Stop Guy. It'd been only a month since he last saw this dude- no, not *even* a month, because it's not November yet- but he looks like he's aged five years.

That... might not be Peter's fault... He'll blame it on Two-Face.

The man's brow is furrowed with worry, hands hovering over Peter's shoulders like he doesn't know what to do with himself. And Peter? He can't help but give their group an exhilarated smile. It causes a chain reaction. Each of them are bewildered in their own way, like Peter has grown another head in front of them. He whispers back his reassurance, "I'm okay!"

"You're *insane!*" The grandma with the cane (that Bus Stop Guy was trying to shush earlier) points said cane at Peter, then bonks him on the head with the end of it. Peter slaps one hand up to his forehead, pouting.

"Hey!" Peter protests, but Cane Grandma isn't done fussing at him.

“Insane! Reckless! Stupid!” She repeats, whacking his forehead with each word, and Bus Stop Guy yanks the cane out of her hand before she can go for a fourth hit.

“You’re getting this back later.” He hisses in a pure Dad voice. Peter, Lanky, and Shoes fold back like they were the ones scolded. Lanky grabs Shoes’ hands and holds it close to his chest. Bus Stop Guy then turns back to Peter, eyes softening back into worry, and then pointing at him angrily. “But she’s right! Why did you do that? What in the world could make you think that was a good idea!?”

“He has a death wish, I’m telling ya.” Shoes whispers conspiratorially. “You know he told Adais here to shoot him?”

“You need to learn to let that go, for my peace and for yours.” Peter whispers back, only half paying attention to them. He’s got his ears trained on Batman and Two-Face, as well as on the goons that are standing around.

“He did what?” Someone asks from behind Shoes. Shoes nods and turns to the stranger.

“He did!”

“You did *what*?” Bus Stop Guy scolds. Totally not cool, cause he’s not Peter’s parent in any shape, way, or form, and has no grounds to fuss at him. Just like *all* of the adults that are currently fussing at him.

The entire bunch of strangers are looking at him like *he’s* the one that escaped Arkham, not Two-Face- or with relief that he wasn’t shot in front of them. None of this is *new* to Peter, but it’s a little strange when he gets this reaction as Peter rather than Spider-Man. He hadn’t realized that this many people would be that worried about what he did- they’re being held hostage, what do they care about him, if they live?

Peter really should stop underestimating the amount of people that would prefer to keep a teenager alive.

But he *had* to do this, and he knew that it’d probably turn out fine. And, of course, it *did*. His calculated plan (half formed and solely residing on Batman properly distracting Two-Face) worked out just as he hoped it would (no deaths and everyone has their limbs in tact). He supposes he has Damian to thank for this, considering that he saw Damian prevent Dick from stepping in.

(That’ll come back to bite him later, won’t it? Damian has been keeping a close eye on him this entire time. But it’s not like Damian could connect Peter back to Spider-Man, that’d be an incredible leap.

...Or not... Both Peter and Spider-Man are about the same age, both are connected to Ohnn, have talked to both versions of the vigilantes in and out of suits, and it would be suspiciously timed.

Y’know what? Whatever. Now’s not the time to dwell on that issue. Maybe he can rope Damian into messing with the others if he really figured it out.)

He got everything he wanted out of that interaction. Two-Face let him get closer, Batman kept his attention while he rambled on and on about injustice and shitty lawyers and bad rich people. And Peter?

Taking one last look over his shoulder to see Two-Face and Batman are still preoccupied with the call (listing off more names of people that Stacy managed to loop into her scheme, *seriously* Stacy, how many people do you got in your back pocket?), Peter pulls his hand out of his jacket pocket. He grins sheepishly, one hand rubbing the back of his head when someone gasps.

“You won’t *believe* what I’ve got.”

Peter has an explosives detonator.

It had taken some patience, because there were just *that* many eyes on him and anyone could have noticed him take it, but Peter managed to snag it when Two-Face threw him towards the group remaining on the car. In Two-Face’s hand right now is *not* the detonator he thinks he’s still holding, but is the Batman themed pen that Simon the toddler had handed to him a few minutes ago.

The plan had formed pretty fast, because everything had been laid out before him. Looks like all of the simulations that FRIDAY put him through ended up helping him in the long run.

That, and Peter spent a good amount of time using his new abilities to become a good pickpocket.

Look, he’s not super proud of it, alright? But he was 12 years old, homeless, had a bunch of freaky spider-powers that he was trying to figure out, and he was *hungry*. So yeah, before he got into his fixing things business, he learned how to pick pockets. Morally, he couldn’t go after anyone that looked like parents, other kids, or people struggling. So he stole from rich people who wouldn’t even notice or care.

And it came in handy, this little trick. The whole switcheroo routine is one of Peter’s favorites. He *may* have learned this from a few books about spies.

Bus Stop Guy’s hand goes over his mouth, and Lanky’s jaw drops. Shoes looks five seconds away from death. Some of the other passengers are leaning over to try and see, while another keeps lookout of the goons that are watching over everybody.

These are none of the reactions that Peter expected.

“You-”

“I take it back!” Cane Grandma breathes through a silent laugh, wagging a finger at Peter and her eyes sparkling with awe. “You sneaky little boy! You’re some kind of genius, aren’t you?”

“Shh, shh!” A woman with a green tote bag warns them. *close near danger!* Peter stuffs his hand back into his pocket, jutting his bottom lip out and trying to think of something sad so

that he looks sad. *Arms of the angels commercials, wiener dogs, cat with three legs, Old Yeller, Bridge to Terabithia*- One of the goons stalks closer, eyes narrowing at Peter for more than a few tense seconds. But then he moves on, looking towards the other hostages, who sink back from his gaze like he was going to bite at any second.

When he's gone to the other side, Peter lets go of the pouting facade with a breath. Lanky starts to shake him by the shoulders, and Peter swats his hands away, startled by the reaction. "What? Why are you-"

"How did you pull that off? Are you some kind of magician?"

"No, you idiot." Shoes slaps his shoulder. "Obviously he's just a damn good pickpocket!"

Peter, not willing to admit that that is exactly right, decides to answer vaguely. "I'm just someone who happens to be good at getting explosives away from a dangerous, hardened criminal. I've got-" Peter chuckles to himself, "-I've got sticky fingers." Each word is like a blow to Bus Stop Guy, who clutches the fabric over his chest like he's having a heart attack. "Are you okay?"

"Am *I* okay?" Bus Stop Guy chokes. "You- My god- I've *never* in all my 45 years of life-"

"He's just like a damn Robin." Lanky whispers conspiratorially to Shoes.

"I resent that. I look *way* cooler than they do." Peter will *not* become a Robin. Not because he has anything against that, or whatever. It's just that he has his own thing going on. Besides, it's not like Peter will be staying here long enough for that to happen. And he isn't adding yellow or green to his red suit.

"Well, what're you gonna do with it now that you've got it? Did ya think that far?" Shoes taps his temple, like Peter doesn't have a brain.

Peter silently looks up at the ceiling, where the hole Batman came through is. Bus Stop Guy takes in a sharp breath, shaking his head and protesting before Peter can even *say* anything. "No. No, that's too risky. You'll get caught before you can even take one step over there."

"I *have* to." Peter says.

"It's enough that you *got* the damn thing." He says, side eyeing one of the goons that makes his way over. They fall into another bout of silence as the goon pauses near them, observing the group, then checking the windows. That's when Bus Stop Guy's eyes fall on the emergency exit window. "You can-"

"That'll make a shit ton of noise as soon as we try to get it open." Peter reminds him. "Those goons are nearer to the exits than we are. The only way out is through the hole in the roof that Batman made. I *have* to get the detonator away from the car."

"Why??? Just give it to Batman! You know, the furry in the batsuit right fuckin' behind ya? Kind of fuckin' hard to miss!" Shoes argues, and Peter shakes his head adamantly.

“No! We need to get it away from Two-Face. Batman needs to focus on what he’s doing. Red Robin or someone else is probably deactivating the bombs that this is connected to. I get out of the car with this, and Two-Face can’t prematurely set anything off.”

“I don’t like this.” Bus Stop Guy frowns. “You’re just a kid. Let someone else do this.”

“It’s because I’m a kid that he’ll underestimate me. Also, I run pretty damn fast.” Peter informs him. He’s already secured the detonator by zipping it up into his new jacket’s pocket, and he’s checking his shoes to make sure they’re tied properly. He sits up onto his knees, looking out at the scene with Batman and Two-Face.

The exit point would be easy to get through if no one was watching, or if he was wearing his suit right now. But to get through and not out himself here and now in front of civilians, he should try and find a way to keep Batman and Two-Face from-

“I’ve got it.” Lanky’s voice is harrowed. As if he’s just seen his own grave, he sets a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“You what?”

“Crazy Kid...”

“My name is Peter.”

“Crazy Peter...” Lanky reforms, a determined light in his eyes. “You scared us into going back to regular paying jobs.”

Peter blinks at him in astonishment. “You’re- You’re welcome?”

“We owe you that, because we’ve been doing better since we got our first paycheck.”

“This is a *really* odd time to be telling me this. You should work on that.”

“You’re a weird, freaky little guy. Unsettling, really. I know you’re not a Gothamite, because you’re looking out for us without being paid to, which means you got a good heart. But you got the mind of a Gothamite, and that’s all that matters.”

“Is this, like, some kind of pep talk? If so, you need to work on that, because it’s not very good. This sounds like something you tell someone before you sacrifice... yourself...” Peter stares at Lanky as it dawns on him. His stomach sinks as the realization hits. “*No...*”

There’s no way. There’s *no way* that this guy that Peter met and chased away a few weeks ago is now risking his life to do something like this for Peter and the others. The man who had no bullets in his gun, and was just trying to live?

“No, Lanky, I can’t ask you to do that.” Peter protests, but Shoes sighs.

“No, he’s right. You’ve got a decent chance.” He says, just as resigned to his fate as Lanky apparently is. “Listen, Crazy Peter.”

“It’s *just* Peter-”

“When you get the go ahead, you *run*.” Shoes looks him in the eye, daring him to disagree. “You run, and you keep running until you find someone to hand that detonator off to.”

“But what are you-”

“I see.” Bus Stop Guy runs a hand through his hair, and Peter blanches.

“I don’t see! Hello! Why am I the only one out of the loop?”

“Peter, you’ve got this.” Bus Stop Guy pats his shoulder, giving him a thumbs up. “We’ll make a distraction so you can get out of here. You’re right, we can’t let Two-Face get anywhere near the detonator, and Batman is busy. You’ll probably run into one of the Robins, maybe Red Hood, cause he’s a good guy too, again, apparently? You can had it off to them.”

“But he could-”

“He could kill us.” Bus Stop Guy agrees. Peter’s mouth clamps shut, and Bus Stop Guy continues. “Gotham’s a pretty fucked up place, kid, no doubt that you know that.”

Peter does, very well. Hell, from Bus Stop Guy’s perspective, he had seen Peter on the worst day of this mess: the very first. Peter had been battered, bruised, lost, confused. And since then, what Peter has seen is a lot of humanity come from the roots of Gotham. Gotham is a city that struggles to thrive, but manages to *live*.

“But my family lives nearby. My wife and my daughter- my wife, she’s always saying that if you have the ability to help someone, and you don’t help them, then you’ve managed to fail yourself and that other person. I ain’t the only one who’s got a family round here. Everyone on this car has somebody. These explosives go off, then we’re asking for hundreds more people to get hurt and lose their homes. Gotham’s bad enough, we can’t roll over and let it happen without trying to stop it.”

“We know what we gotta do.” Lanky give him a wobbly grin. “At this point, we just gotta put our faith into you and Batman, right?”

Peter nods numbly, the detonator suddenly a heavy weight in his pocket. All of this...

It’s a nice sentiment.

Too bad Peter isn’t gonna let that happen.

“I feel bad that I don’t know your name, now.” Peter tells Bus Stop Guy, his voice hushing low when that goon makes another round towards them again.

The man chuckles at him. His hands are shaking. “Giovanni.”

close coming near see it?

“Alright, Giovanni.” Peter grins, patting the older man’s arm. “You’re gonna get home to your wife and daughter. ‘Cause it’s not necessary for anyone to risk their lives here.”

The three men groan in disbelief that Peter wasn’t ‘getting’ the message. Giovanni runs a hand down his face, about to protest, when Peter kicks his foot out behind him, swooping underneath the approaching goon’s foot.

The astonishingly large man trips over Peter’s foot, falling over the seat and hitting his head on the window. Immediately, the three other goons freak out. Two of them run over to grab their buddy, who’s clutching his nose as blood freely drips from between his fingers. One of them rounds on the group, pointing his gun at them, and Peter kicks upwards at the man’s elbow, breaking his arm as his elbow *snaps!* in the wrong direction.

He grabs the gun before it can hit the floor, stands up, and butts the end of it into the third goon’s face as the second falls to his knees, clutching his broken arm. The third goon howls in pain, enraged, but Peter hits him again before he can reach out to grab Peter. The goon knocks out, falling to the ground on top of the first goon.

Peter drops the gun just as Two-Face whirls around to see what’s going on. Batman slams his fist into Two-Face’s cheek, the man hitting his head on a pole with a sharp *ding!* Peter jumps over the first goon and pulls down on the emergency exit window lever.

The entire car bursts into noise and emergency flashing lights. The alarm rings out overhead, mixing with Cane Grandma’s howling laughter. Two-Face has lost his gun with the struggle with Batman, but he’s surprisingly able to keep up with the vigilante in a fist fight.

The two men are hitting each other, scrambling to get the upper hand. Batman ducks away from Two-Face’s next swing, and the rogue’s fist hits the window. A ring on his finger makes a painful screeching noise, and when he pulls his gloved fist back it’s covered in blood and glass, the fabric torn over his knuckles.

“That’s *it!* You’ve just signed everyone’s death warrants, Batman!”

Peter scrambles to his feet, turning to the other hostages. “Get up and get the doors open!”

It takes them a second to comprehend what Peter said. Giovanni is the first to snap out of his shock. He’s on his feet in moments, hopping over the sprawled goons and headed towards the door. He slips in Deus’ blood as he gets there. Lanky helps some of the other hostages up off their feet as the more athletic of the passengers join Giovanni in trying to pry open the doors.

Peter hangs back for a heartbeat, just to make sure that Batman doesn’t need the backup. He bounces on his toes, ready to make a break for it in either direction- backup, or run.

WATCH IT!

He bends his knees and flattens himself on the ground. A shot rings out a second later, the bullet smashing through the window that was behind his head. The glass rains over Peter. He shakes it off of his jacket and his hair, a shot of adrenaline coursing through him. He shoots his gaze back up at Two-Face and Batman, heart thudding loudly in his ears.

The .22 caliber was back in Two-Face's hand, but it's now on the ground again, having slid underneath some seats. Two-Face is choking Batman near the doors that lead to the other car. He had aimed for Peter just then, not Batman, even though he had the shot.

Why?

Did he seriously get *that* ticked off from what Peter said? Or-

No, Peter knows why. He wants Batman to get angry enough to kill him.

The entire set up here didn't make sense. Two-Face was angry, rambling, and several times, he had referenced himself lumped in with the other criminals. What he was implying was that Batman's choice wasn't the people he needed to save, but that he needed to decide to kill Two-Face, for good.

Peter has a feeling Two-Face isn't gonna get what he wants.

Batman flings Two-Face over his shoulder in a swift motion, glancing towards Peter's direction as soon as he's able to. When he sees that Peter isn't hurt, there's a split second where Peter hears Batman's short sigh of relief in the chaos.

He pulls back on Two-Face's arm, attempting to pin him with his foot to Two-Face's chest, but Two-Face grips Batman's arm and twists it, then kicks into Batman's knee. It doesn't actually break anything, but it hit hard enough that it forces Batman's center off balance.

It's just long enough of a recovery time that Two-Face gets the door open to the other car, and the last remaining goon starts shooting into the car.

Peter takes a step forward to stop him as the bullet ricochets too close to the hostages instead of Batman, but he blinks and the goon is down. The man's body slumps forward onto the ground in between the cars, a red mark on his forehead and cut that begins to bleed. Batman runs after Two-Face into the other cars, and Peter is left torn.

Does he go after Batman after all? Does he help? Or does he stick with what he was doing before? Or, does he help the hostages?

The answer is provided for him. The hostages are getting the door open without his help, nearly halfway there. And Batman is already gone, chasing after the man who, for some reason, didn't set off his bomb yet.

Or at least, *tried* to. Because Peter has his detonator.

Peter slaps his forehead to break himself out of it.

Batman doesn't need Peter's help with Two-Face, and Peter has a job to do, with this detonator. He needs to make sure the bombs are disarmed, because that's where the biggest source of danger is coming from.

"Peter!" Shoes gawks at him over the noise of the fight. "Where the *hell* are you *from*, kid!?"

The question snaps Peter out of his indecision fully. He laughs, even if it makes him look absolutely bonkers.

“Queens!”

Peter salutes the astonished man, who just shakes his head as if he didn’t believe Peter in the slightest. That’s alright- let him believe anything he wants. He hurries past Stacy, who is still clutching onto Deus and hasn’t moved from the car.

He grabs a pole and shimmies up it, then flips up through the hole that Batman made in the ceiling. Both feet land on the top of the car, and he peers down both directions of the tunnel.

They hadn’t been moving for very long when the train had been stopped, maybe five minutes? There’s yellow emergency lights flickering down both ways he could go, and a sign on the wall that directs subway workers which way the stations are. There’s also a couple of graffiti tags that tell Peter that this section of the subway had been closed for a while at some point, based on the fact that they’re all faded around the same amount.

He closes his eyes, setting his hand on the metal of the car.

The explosives...

near close fading?

Fading, huh?

That’s gotta mean that one of the Bats is nearby just like he thought they’d be. The explosives are slowly getting disarmed.

It’s probably slow because they had to split up. Someone had to go find the warehouses with the other kidnapped people that Two-Face had listed off. Red Hood, maybe, or Spoiler? Doesn’t matter who, he’ll find out who’s in the tunnels soon enough.

He hears the doors screech as they’re finally pried open.

“Peter!” Giovanni yells, sticking his head through the doors. “Where did the kid go?”

“He went through the hole!” Lanky shouts. “Come on, he’s gonna go find a Bat!”

“That crazy-!” Peter hears Giovanni scoff, and he can’t help but smirk as he runs the opposite direction that the hostages do- towards the right, while they take the left, which leads back to the station their train had left from.

Peter doesn’t need a coin flip to tell him which one was the way he needed to go.

-

hello! we know! hello! hey danger close danger get away friend

It didn't take long for Peter's spider-sense to tell him that someone was nearby. And that it wasn't happy to see Red Robin defusing a bomb.

Even without spider-sense chiming in to tell him, Peter recognized his heartbeat just as he's done quite a few times recently. He can finally admit that when he heard Red Robin nearby, he felt his chest rise with excitement, and he couldn't stop smiling. Just like his spider-sense, Peter was anticipating seeing his friend.

The dark of the tunnels sort of put Peter at a sense of ease, as well as his spider-sense, despite the active bomb threat overhead. Look, he never said that he made sense, ever. It's just that the air is just chilly and damp enough that it feels like a burrow, somewhere decent to crawl and hide and to make a nest.

He's feeling more "nesty" as the month draws into colder and colder weather, as he does every fall and winter season. Peter hadn't known that spiders hibernate when the temperature drops low enough until his first week as Spider-Man. He had gone homeless on Christmas day, so one can imagine how that had worked out for him. Maybe he'll reflect on that later. His skin gets itchy when he thinks about it for too long.

Well, Peter doesn't think he'll make a nest right now. That'd be too weird, in this situation. He should save that for later when he gets back to Benny's, or something, and wants to get cozy.

Because he can't give in to that spider-instinct, he satisfies the spider part of him by crawling on the top of the tunnel instead of walking on the ground. It feels safer, and he likes being higher up, having a better vantage point of the area.

He left the train behind a couple minutes ago, as well as most of the noise. He can still hear and feel the traffic up above, but it's moving away from where their train had stopped in the tunnel, so Peter thinks it's safe to assume people are evacuating. With the city going quiet up above, and his spider-sense just buzzing lowly from the nearby bombs, everything has this still sort of feeling.

(Peter doesn't know how to describe it other than it being like before a decathlon meet. One time he had stood on the stage alone, before they let the people outside walk in. The lights had looked down at him, and there was something about the moment that felt like it was frozen in time.)

His mind is sort of caught on that feeling as he turns around a bend in the tunnel and he spots Red Robin below.

Peter crouches, one hand on the stone, his feet underneath him, tilting his head as he watches Red Robin- *Tim*, he reminds himself- work. Red Robin moves with scarily accurate speed, but he's so gentle with the wires, like he's done this a million times before. It's almost like watching someone practice an instrument, with how familiar Red Robin's movements are with the bomb.

Maybe Batman makes them do this sort of training? He seems like the type to make everyone do that. Meanwhile, Peter *knows* how to defuse a bomb, but he's also been told, "*Just call me*

or someone else to do that and get the hell outta dodge, yeah?" when he brings it up to Tony. The last thing he'd want is to lose Peter, let alone in an explosion.

His bo-staff is set to the side, along with a few tools that Tim is using to disarm the bombs. He sticks his tongue out between his teeth as he works, brow furrowed. He's so concentrated on the bomb, that he doesn't notice that Peter is lurking behind him.

"Double R, how's it coming?"

That's Bab's voice coming from Tim's comm piece. Peter once again wonders about her. Is she at the library right now? That must have been what she was doing all those other times- Oh, man, Peter was *right there* when she was doing vigilante work and he hadn't even *noticed*.

Babs being the first of them that Peter came across while in this world is sort of... He doesn't know. It makes him feel warm inside to see that she had been the one that had the others start following him around, even if that had been frustrating and scary for him, at first. She had cared enough to find him even though he was such a weirdo when they first met.

(And still is weird.)

It's because of her that Peter ended up trusting them, in a roundabout way. Sure, he hasn't had a heart to heart with her like he had with Red Hood or Nightwing, but she had been a safe place to go to, even though he pretended the library wasn't exactly that.

He could have gone to another library and sorted that out. But he went for Babs. She saw how weird he was being and not once did she pressure him. She just *tried*. And that means she's pretty cool, in his book.

"It's coming." Red Robin replies and grits his teeth, not happy at all. Peter wonders who switched out is Cheerios for bland old raisin bran. Who doesn't love defusing bombs on a random evening?

"How many have you gotten to so far?" Babs sounds just as tired.

"There's a crap ton of these in the tunnels. I've gotten about 6 of them so far but there's 7 more that I need to get to. Which means there's at *least* one more, because that only adds to 13." Tim snips a wire in the bomb.

"Batman is still keeping Two-Face preoccupied so he doesn't set off the detonator. They ended up off of the train and are fighting in one of the abandoned stations that were claimed during No Man's." She informs him. What is No Man's? Peter hasn't heard of that before in his Gotham gossiping. *"Red Hood managed to get three of Two-Face's targets out of the first warehouse, but there's still more. This McGuire woman sure had a lot of people behind her- bet that's changing after today."*

Peter crawls down the wall on the other side of the tracks from Tim, landing silently on the ground. He sits down on the side, dangling his legs over the tracks and watching the back of

Tim's head. He wonders when the best time is to tell Tim that he's here. Would that be, like, right now...? Or...?

"Hey, can you hear me?"

He perks up when he hears Dick's voice on the line, foregoing announcing himself. Peter had almost forgotten that Dick and Damian might not have been able to get away so easily from the police that are surely outside, so they can come help the others. He wonders where they are- are they with Team A? Or are they helping Team B? Is Team B back at the station already? Peter had been walking long enough that they should be back by now.

But it strikes Peter just how panicked Dick sounds- or, maybe not *panic*, but fear.

"Wing, you're alright." Tim's shoulders almost relax, but he surely noticed it too. "What's happening on your end? The other two okay?"

"Yeah, I've been trying to contact you for an hour now. Can you fill me in on what exactly happened on the train? There's only so much I could do with audio." Babs lets out her own breath of relief.

"Just a moment." There's a beat where Peter thinks he hears ruffling noise, but he's too far away to hear that on the comm, he'd have to have it in his ear. *"What do you know?"*

"All I was able to ascertain was that Two-Face killed Deus and was holding Stacy and someone else at gunpoint while making his demands. Bat was busy with that, so I sent Red Hood, Black Bat, and Signal after the names that Two-Face listed. Red Robin is defusing the bombs that are in the subway tunnel. After that, Bat got into it with Two-Face, there's was some kind of commotion. He's unable to talk at the moment."

"We're here at the station where they evacuated us." Dick informs them greaviously. *"But it's just Rob and I- I'm kind of hiding in someone's car to talk to you, so I gotta make this quick."*

"What?" Tim hesitates, then cusses to himself and focuses back on the wires in his hands. *"Please tell me you know where Peter is. I know it's sort of his thing, but you can not have lost him after him being under your watch for, like, five minutes."*

"I... can not tell you that." Dick is immensely regretful, and Peter feels both terrible for stressing him out and finding it just a *little* funny. *"We were doing fine for a minute there. But Two-Face killed Deus and I could see he was slipping. I was going to do something about it, but he yelled about a kid and Peter... Jesus. He started mouthing off to him. I think I'm still having a heart attack."*

"I'd say something, but I'm pretty sure we've all done that at some point." Tim mutters.

Dick chuckles, but it comes out as more of a strangled noise than anything else, like his heart really isn't in it.

“Wait, do not tell me that it was Peter who was being held at gunpoint.” Babs already knows the answer.

“Bat showed up right after Two-Face made Peter get up and they were talking. Or more like a verbal beatdown. Peter was winning.” Dick almost sounds proud, but why? *“But that’s besides the point- We were on the first group of hostages that were let out, but Peter got put into the second group after that. We got split up, and I haven’t seen him since.”*

“So he’s still on the train?”

“That’s the thing- The second group just showed up at the station and are being evacuated from the area. Peter’s not with them. From what they’re saying, he caused a distraction and got them off of the train.”

“That would be about the time that Bat chased Two-Face down, he said the hostages were getting off, and that was his latest line of communication.” Babs sounds so exhausted that Peter feels a strike of guilt. He hadn’t meant to get separated and cause them to think he’s hurt somewhere. *“I can try to start a search for him, but I’m sort of spread thin here.”*

“Hold on, I see Lanky and Shoes.”

“You see what and what now?” Tim shakes his head, cutting the last wire on the bomb and sounding absolutely baffled.

“Two of Peter’s friends, they were in group B. I’m gonna go get some answers. Talk to you in a minute.”

With that, it’s just Tim and Babs left on the line.

He definitely has to sort this out now, so that Dick and the others don’t think he died. He wants to mess with them, but he’d never just go radio silent after an event like this. Who would? That’d be a major dick move, to just not let them know that he’s alright.

Peter jumps down onto the tracks, then pulls himself up to Tim’s side. He stands behind Tim as the older boy sits back on his heels, pulling up a small device from his utility belt. Peter peers over his shoulder curiously.

Looks like he’s listed all of the bombs that he’s spotted. Some of them are nearby, some are farther down the tunnel. Red Hood and Signal are saving the people that Two-Face had rounded up in other parts of the city, and apparently, so is the Secret Bat. “Black Bat” is kind of cool for a name, but then again, she had been kind of cool, even though she scared the shit out of Peter at the time.

With those three off doing something else and Spoiler injured... Looks like they might need help defusing the bombs. Or, well- they don’t *have* to rush Tim, because he doesn’t have to worry about Two-Face setting them off without warning.

“Oracle, does Bat have eyes on the detonator? Why hasn’t Two-Face set these off yet, if everything went to shit for him?”

A wicked grin slides onto Peter's face. He can't stop it, not that he would want to. It's just that... Coupon has left himself open to this.

"Because he doesn't have it."

"He doesn't?"

There's a beat of silence, where Tim is still checking off two of the bombs he's already disarmed. Then, very unsure of what she just heard, Babs says slowly, "*Double R, who just said that?*"

A tense few heartbeats where Tim doesn't move, besides every muscle in his body tensing up like a live wire. Peter takes a step backwards, the hairs raising on his neck as he feels the shift from calm to near deadly.

LOOK OUT!!

Peter ducks back, bending at the waist and setting his hands on the ground as Tim's bo staff swings overhead. The air breezes past his nose by an inch with a *whoosh*. Peter flips backwards, landing in a crouch on the balls of his feet. His hands fly up to grab the end of the bo staff right before it can slam into his mouth.

"What the-"

He leans to one side to show Tim his face, beaming up at the older boy like he hadn't just tried to knock him out. "What's up, Red Robin?"

"Peter!" Tim pulls back the bo staff instantly. He looks back in the tunnel as if that'll tell him where the hell Peter came from. Peter snickers, standing up and dusting his hands free of the tiny rocks. "Why are you- I mean- When did you *get* here?"

"Just now." He replies smoothly.

"I could have hurt you! Don't sneak up on people like that, especially not one of us!" Tim scowls at him. He reaches out to touch Peter's shoulder, giving him a once over. He for *sure* wants to ask more about how Peter even managed to sneak up on a Bat at all, but he bites his tongue. *Literally* bites his tongue. "Are you hurt at all? Were you on the train?"

Of course, he has to ask. Peter shouldn't know that Red Robin knows he was there.

"Oh, no, not at all. I just happen to like strolling through the subway tunnels and risk my life, bombs or no bombs." He raises a brow, and Tim just stares at him, unimpressed with the sarcasm. "Jeez, fine, I won't say anything funny *ever* again."

Babs laughs, however, and Peter can't help but feel a little bit of pride upon hearing it. It only spurs him on. "I was walking home with a couple friends of mine and the *craziest* thing happened." Peter smiles oh-so-innocently at the vigilante. "I'll give you three guesses what it was."

"You seem uninjured."

“Boo you for not playing along.” Peter pretends to pout, but he gets over his grievance quickly. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing that involves you. You should head towards the next station and evacuate, okay?” Tim squeezes his shoulder. *worry* his spider sense bites at Peter, telling him that Tim would *really* appreciate if Peter took him up on that.

Peter doesn’t.

“I heard you asking your friend about the detonator.” Peter tilts his head. “Two-Face doesn’t have it anymore.”

Tim’s lips press into a thin line. He hesitates, but he says, “Oracle, did you get that?”

(Babs vigilante name is Oracle? That’s... sick as *fuck*.)

Peter has to stop himself from grinning too wide, lest Tim ask why he looks like that. But that’s actually such a cool name for someone like Babs, who is their tech person, or something like that. Peter thinks his is the first not-stupid name ((besides Nightwing, he’ll give credit for that one)) that he’s heard since he’s gotten here. Way cooler than ‘Superman’.)

“I haven’t heard from Batman about it.” Babs says. Peter pretends he can’t hear, because he’s not supposed to, choosing to look idle by looking around the tunnel with his hands in his jacket pocket. He rocks back and forth on his feet, whistling a nameless tune.

Peter is 100% sure, even though Tim has his mask on right now, that he just narrowed his eyes with suspicion at him. “Peter...”

“Red Robin.”

“How do you know if Two-Face has the detonator or not?” He asks, putting his hands on his hips and staring Peter down. Ah, well, Peter’s not one who gets fussed at easily. If Tim is going to treat Peter like he’s a cat who’s started chewing on something he’s not supposed to have, then Peter is going to act like it.

“I’ll give you three guesses.”

“Peter.”

“Is that your first guess?” Peter tilts his head to the side. It’s right then that Babs bursts into laughter, and Peter has to hold back his own laugh.

“You do *not* have a detonator on you right now.”

“Reverse psychology doesn’t make detonators magically disappear, Bird.” Peter shrugs, but he pulls out the detonator from his pocket. Red Robin’s heart stutters.

“How did you get that!?” The older boy demands, going to snatch it from Peter. Peter pulls his hand back fast, out of his reach. “Give that to me!”

“No, it’s mine now. Finders keepers, losers weepers.”

Tim goes to grab it again, but Peter’s reflexes are too quick for him. Peter ducks under his arm, twists on his heel, and faces Tim’s back before the other can so much as blink. Peter puts on his best Innocent face when Tim turns around again.

“You little-!”

“*Double R, you alright there?*” Babs practically hums with amusement in Tim’s ear.

Tim tries once again to snatch it. “Peter, you can’t *keep* a detonator! Do you even understand how dangerous that is?”

Peter jumps out of his way, unrestrained laughter echoing in the tunnel. “Why not? It’s not any less dangerous if you hold onto it.”

“*Double R, tell me you’re not actually struggling to get it from him.*” Babs is starting to sound more astonished than she is amused. Tim growls in frustration, chasing Peter towards the wall. Peter hops onto it, sticking his feet for a second to climb a couple steps, and then jumps as if he’s just parkouring. He lands behind Tim and he plops himself onto the ground, cross legged.

Peter leans his chin on one hand, blinking up at Tim, who is standing there gobsmacked. He snaps out of his shock to point at Peter.

“How did you get it!?”

He hums, wiggling the detonator in one hand. Tim’s heart stutters again, disliking the action, so Peter does it once more. “Hmmm... well, Two-Face looked like he was going through it. And in my experience, cuckoos lose their focus when they’re mad. I’ve got a little pickpocket experience, so I figured I *might* as well put it to use.”

Tim pinches the bridge of his nose. His every movement *screams* frustration, confusion. A little bit of ‘I want to strangle this kid’ which is rude. He sets a hand on his hip, thinking his next words over carefully.

“*So that’s what Wing meant earlier?*” Babs asks. Peter can imagine her leaning back in her chair to look at her screen better. “*About Peter mouthing off to Two-Face? ...He had that planned out.*”

Peter would preen from how impressed she sounds if he wasn’t so conscious about knowing he shouldn’t be hearing her. He might not succeed, but Tim still had his eyes closed. Tim takes a deep breath, lowering his hand from his face to stare at Peter fully. Then, he drops into a crouch in front of Peter, defeated... *ish*. He might just be waiting to strike.

“You confronted a dangerous rogue while he was actively holding you hostage with both guns and bombs.”

“That’s such a boring way to put it.” Peter says, and Tim scoffs. This time, there’s a small grin on his lips, and Peter knows he’s working him down. “But whatever. However you put it,

I'd say: If he didn't want me to steal his detonator, he shouldn't have made it so easy to steal his detonator. Simple math."

"Can I have it now?" Tim holds out his hand.

See, the thing is... Peter could give it back. He could leave and go back to the tunnel, fully done with messing with the Bats, and he could find Dick and Damian. And then he'd tell them that he's Spider-Man, because he's had his fun.

However... Coupon is just so fun to mess with, man.

"Absolutely not." Peter shakes his head. "You should really be focusing on your bombs."

He has an excuse to hang around and bother Red Robin if he holds onto the detonator, and Tim doesn't look like he *wants* to hurt Peter in order to get it. Peter awaits with bated breath for what Tim is going to decide next, his chin now on both hands and smiling ear to ear.

Just a little more fun, and then Peter will tell them.

"He's kind of right. I don't like that he's so dead set on keeping that thing, but you do have to move on, if you, for some reason, really can't get it from him." Tim scowls and tries to protest, likely because Babs isn't here to know that Tim had no fighting chance. *"They still need to be defused so they're less dangerous."* Babs reminds Tim, who doesn't take well to that news. He hangs his head for a moment, then stands up again.

"Roger that." Tim sighs, then turns his attention to Peter, pointing at him seriously. Peter fakes a serious face, and it must be obvious that it's fake, because Tim remains steadfastly unimpressed. "You stick close to me. You're giving it back once this is over, or I'm telling Batman to take it from you."

Peter jumps to his feet in a flash, stuffing the detonator in his pocket and zipping it up in one smooth motion. He jogs over to Red Robin's side as the other vigilante starts hurrying towards the next bomb, farther down the tunnel. He has a small skip in his step, with furthers Tim's dislike for the situation.

"Gee, this is super fun, Red Robin! I'll be on my *best* behavior, promise!" Peter slaps on his cheeriest voice. Tim is clearly not buying it. "Who were you talking to just now?"

"No one that you need to know."

"No fuuuuuuun." Peter throws his head back to groan.

"Wait, no, put me in Peter's ear too." Babs sounds all too eager.

"What?" Tim stops dead in his tracks. Peter stops too, turning back and looking at Tim like he's crazy, but inside he's ecstatic.

"What're you freaking out about?" *Pleeeeeeease give him a comm please please pleeeeeasseeeee-*

"I want to talk to him too. Besides... we all know there's no way he's not coming back with you guys later tonight." Babs says, and Tim groans, slapping a hand on his forehead.

What!

So now they're blatantly planning to kidnap him right in front of his face! Or, basically in front of his face! It counts!

"You're right..."

Peter would like to disagree, and finds it very difficult not to do exactly that, out loud. Just because he's going to tell them he's Spider-Man doesn't mean he was planning on going back to their place. That would mean getting too comfortable with them- he isn't going to play house with anyone. He is not playing Batman and Robin with anyone. Spider-Man is *not* a sidekick!

"Who's right?" Peter steps closer, and Tim drags his hand down his face, wishing to be anywhere but here.

The older boy reaches into his utility belt, pulling out an identical comm to the one in his own ear. He shows it to Peter, who takes it without warning. Tim blanches at the action, and then says, "...This is a comm piece. In case we get separated."

Lying liar. But hey, this is cool!

"Sick!" Peter shakes one hand out to relieve some of his excitement.

The comm is a small thing, but not nearly as developed as Tony's tech is. Though, Wayne tech isn't *that* far off- or is this exclusively BatTech? It's just like it's a few years behind Stark Industries. But it's still cool to see. Peter's own comm- that he turns on every now and then when he's unobserved and waits for a message on- sits in his hoodie pocket now, underneath his new jacket, next to Little Legs.

"To turn it on-"

"Got it." Peter says, already having placed it in his ear as it came to life. Tim blue screens with how fast Peter had figured it out. However, Peter himself was more focused on memorizing their frequency line. "This *is* pretty cool! Is Batman on here? How often am I allowed to annoy him? Don't answer that, I want no limit so no matter what you say, it's happening."

"Is this Peter?" Babs' voice filters through Peter's ear. At first, it's a little too loud, so Peter adjusts the volume to go way, way lower while wincing. Immediately, Peter feels Tim's gaze on him, and his spider-sense tingles *watching watching*.

Whatever. Peter's going to tell them anyways. Also: sort of funny that Babs has to pretend like she isn't fully aware of Peter's voice. And Peter, hers.

"Hi, yeah, I'm Peter. Who's this?"

"Hey Peter," Babs, for some reason, sounds ridiculously fond. Peter tries to ignore it, but it makes him feel really nice. *"-I'm Oracle. I've heard a lot about you. It's nice to finally meet you."*

"It's nice to meet you too, Oracle. I guess I can assume you're the one that keeps the Bats' heads on straight?" Peter's joke makes her laugh loudly, and Tim scoffs, but it's a light hearted thing. Tim continues on now that Peter has the comm in his ear.

"Yeah, that'd be me. And you're the one that has everyone running around the opposite." She says, and Peter can't help but grin at that. *"You know, for someone that just apparently stole a detonator right from under Two-Face and faced a hostage situation, you're pretty calm."*

"You wouldn't believe it, but this is hardly the worst I've had to face. This has actually been pretty fun." Peter can practically see the discomfort from Tim in front of him, as if the idea that Peter had seen worse was eating away at him.

There's a click as someone else comes onto the line. In a hurry, Babs speaks before they can.

"Wing! You'll never guess who Red Robin found in the tunnels." She says, and there's an intake of breathe from Dick.

"Hey, Nightwing." Peter, for some reason, says this a little quieter.

"Peter, buddy, I'm glad you're okay." Dick sounds so harrowed that the guilt manages to sink in. He supposes he got a little carried away, but he hadn't... Well, now he feels stupid. But he hadn't really expected Dick to get *this* worried about him. *"I was looking for you. I heard from your friends what you did. That was pretty brave."*

"Which friends? I made a ton in Team B."

"Team B?" Tim looks over his shoulder as they come to a stop. He drops down to his knees in front of the next bomb, and Peter leans against the wall next to him, nodding.

"Yeah, Team A, Team B. Was easier than referring to it as "hostage group A or B", and I had baseball on the mind. I dunno. I just visited my friend Happy, and he likes baseball, so that's probably why."

Tim perks up at the name, and Peter wonders why. Had he mentioned Happy before...?

"Well, Dick Grayson and Damian Wayne were worried about you, so they asked me to see where you went." Peter thinks Dick is just being an asshole, now, trying to make him feel like the meanest Spider-Man ever. But before Peter can ask how they're doing and try to save some face here: *"Then I heard from your friends Tomas and Adais about you getting everyone else on Team B out."*

Peter purses his lips in thought, ignoring how his spider sense whispers *curious* about Tim.

"I'm sorry, but who in the world are those two?"

There's a beat of silence. *"Um, a skinny dude, and a shorter man-"*

“Oh. Lanky and Shoes.” Peter can’t believe he forgot their names already. They’re just Lanky and Shoes in his head, so he can’t compute that they have actual names.

“Do I even want to ask why those nicknames?” Tim, who must still be bitter about Coupon, sounds like he’s just gone through a tornado. Peter chuckles.

“They tried to rob me and I didn’t have the pleasantry for asking their names. Forevermore, they are Lanky and Shoes. But that’s besides the point. What’d they say, Nightwing? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” Dick, as well, sounds like he needs a drink. However, his voice softens next, and he almost sounds *proud*. But it doesn’t make sense. *“You were pretty cool in there from what I heard. Sounded like you were a hero.”*

Peter feels his face flush, and he crosses his arms. He doesn’t know *why* he’s reacting like this, it’s nothing he hasn’t heard before, with Spider-Man, or from his mentors. It felt different this time, and Peter doesn’t want to compute that.

Tim laughs as he cuts the last wire off the bomb, and Peter glares at him in an effort to make his brain explode. Despite the cut throat motion Peter waves at him, Tim proceeds to tease, all too delighted, “Oh, *man*, Peter, what’s with that face? You-”

“Don’t you have more bombs to defuse!?” Peter leans off of the wall. Tim’s laughter echoes across the tunnel, and Babs’ chuckling in his ear doesn’t help the matter. “About 6 more, right? That’s plenty of time to shut up.”

“Wait, how did you-”

“I looked over your shoulder.”

“You said you *just* got there!” Tim protests. Peter jogs to walk in front of him, giving a big huge over dramatic shrug. “Peter!”

“Red Robin!” Peter mimics.

-

“So, are you apart of the Justice League?”

“That’s a long story.”

Tim tears out the wire of the last bomb, and with it, Peter knows the fun has come to an end. Tim leans back onto his heels as he crouches down, then decides that he’d prefer to just sit down all together, like Peter is. Peter is sitting close enough that their knees touch, fiddling with the detonator in his hands. He’s nervous, is why. Always nervous.

“Batman is.”

“I’m not Batman.”

“That’s obvious.” Peter grins at him, leaning back to look at Tim better. With Peter facing the tracks and Tim facing the wall, sitting side by side, it’s the only way to get a good look at his face. “You couldn’t pull off that voice he does. *I’m Batman*. See? I can’t do it either.”

“You haven’t had your voice drop yet, kid. And can you *please* stop waving that thing around?” Tim finally takes the detonator from Peter, who yawns loudly, stretching out the noise just to tick Tim off.

“It’s literally fine. I broke it way earlier and you got all the bombs.”

“You *what*?” Tim looks down at the thing. It looks so inconspicuous, for something so deadly. Peter had pulled it apart and snapped the wires about an hour ago, when Tim was focused on the bombs and Peter was talking to Babs, for the most part. Sure enough, when Tim pops open the side, the wires are mangled up.

‘Nightwing’ had to get off of the comm during the worst of the evacuation outside. There were bound to be troubles and annoyances and accidents, what with this city, and with everything in general just being a nightmare. Someone needed to help clear it all out while the GCPD (those fuckers) had to handle the aftermath with the victims on the train, etc etc, whatever.

Since then, Babs had been keeping tabs on everyone. She keeps Peter and Tim on the line, and occasionally he’ll find out what the other heroes are out there doing. Signal had made a brief appearance at some point when he got three people out of one warehouse, and he was fairly surprised to hear Peter, but he hadn’t the time to talk. Black Bat had just sent in a single silent communication to Oracle, which means she is as mysterious as ever. And then there’s Batman- who has apparently captured Two-Face as of 30 minutes ago.

All he had said was that he was going to drop Two-Face with some GCPD fellows to take him to a high security whatever, and that he’d meet Tim at one of the stations nearby the last bomb. Peter wishes he could have seen Batman fight more. He got Two-Face down for the count in 30 minutes, it’s kind of impressive. But he supposes he’ll be seeing more of it soon, considering he has to tell them his identity now.

Peter has been messing with Tim for about an hour, so he figures it’s time to let it go. He had his fun with the Two-Face thing on the train, he freaked them out a little, and now he’s gonna do it.

He just has to work himself up to saying it.

It’s just that it’s a little hard to do that.

After all, he’s never done this before- that being, *telling* another vigilante, or groups. The Avengers figured it out during the whole kidnapping shit that Peter went through. Peter is one of the most strict about his identity needing to be a secret out of all the Avengers.

Hell, look at *Tony*. He just went right out and told everyone on the planet. Peter is the complete opposite, in that regard.

Right. Working up to it.

And working up to it means that Peter is gonna slowly work his way into talking about Spider-Man, and then that'll work. Perfect plan, Peter Grayson. No, Peter *Parker*. He's getting his identities mixed up again... Why does he have to have so many names? Spider-Man, Peter Benjamin John Andrea Parker, Just Parker, and now Peter Grayson.

Heeeee's stalling...

"...When did you...?" Tim looks down at the useless detonator, scratching his head.

Peter doesn't answer. He lies back to lean on the wall, hands behind his head and throwing his feet out to get comfortable.

"You sound like you don't like them."

"Huh?"

"The Justice League. You said 'It's a long story' like how people say it when they dislike someone."

"We have a complicated history." Tim settles on, putting the broken detonator into his utility belt.

"Does that mean Superman is secretly a jerk?"

"No, it's just... things are complicated. I just don't work with the Justice League unless they need me. I prefer my team."

"Batman and co? I guess that makes sense." Peter shrugs. He knows there are plenty of people with powers and vigilantes that manage to not work with the Avengers.

"I- Yeah, of course." Tim says, and even Peter, not the best at social awareness, can hear that Tim had said this like he just remembered he was apart of the Bats. Now *that's* curious...

"And there's also Young Justice. I work with them a lot."

So that's who Tim really meant when he said he preferred his team.

"Young Justice?"

"Um, yeah?" Tim sounds confused by his question, and Peter pauses. He fucked up.

He... is probably supposed to know who that is, isn't he? Shit. He hadn't done any research on them, all he had seen was about the Justice League and the Bats. He really should have snuck into the library to do more research about this world.

"Ah. Right. Young Justice. I know them." Peter recovers oh so smoothly.

"...You don't?"

Damn. Peter is never gonna catch a fucking break.

“I’m chronically offline.”

Tim scoffs at him, standing up and then holding his hand out to help Peter up as well. “I’m fairly sure they teach this in school.”

“Okay Rockin’ Robin, I don’t think either of us should pretend that I go to school.” Peter takes his hand, then puts his hands on his hips when he’s upright. Tim raises a brow. Oh, right. “Currently. I have, in fact, been inside a school before. At times.” Peter saves it.

...Peter had missed 2 years of schooling during his bout of homelessness. He only got into Midtown because he had to go through legal hoops and testing to prove he could keep up with his grades, and get a certification for his middle school education. He’s... He’s missed an entire month of his freshman year...

He begs Loki to be doing well.

“Yeah, I *figured*.”

Ah, he sounds a little salted about that. Peter forgot he met Tim at Gotham Academy. That must have rubbed in his face the wrong way. Peter holds back a laugh as Tim walks away from the bomb, and towards their designated meeting spot for Batman. Again, Peter recalls that he’s supposed to be telling Tim that he’s Spider-Man, and that little knot of anxiety in his chest comes back.

“So who’s on the Young Justice team? Besides you.”

“There’s Impulse, one of the speedsters.” Peter nods as if he knows what the hell *that* means. “And... well, it’s. Also complicated, right now.”

“Sounds like your life is pretty complicated. Justice League, Young Justice, Bats. That’s rough, buddy.”

Tim ignores him. “But then there’s Superboy-”

“Hold on, hold on. He *willingly* named himself Superboy?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s... Like, didn’t he want his own name?”

Tim hesitates, then cryptically answers, “...You’d have to ask him. But maybe don’t.”

“Was it just because he’s young?” Peter asks, but then pauses. This is a good opening, isn’t it? It is. He should say something. He should say, ‘*Like, I didn’t name myself Spider-Boy.*’ It would work, and it’d confuse Tim, and they’d laugh.

“I mean, Spider-Man isn’t calling himself Spider-Boy.”

Literally what is wrong with him?

“I-” Tim stops in his tracks, hands on Peter’s shoulders to stop him too. Peter almost flinches, but then remembers that Tim is safe. “That’s right! Peter- Have you... met him?”

Oh.

“Spider-Man?”

“Yes. We’ve been trying to get in touch with him.”

Oh.

This could work, too. Peter would like to know what they think of Spider-Man, too.

Babs cuts in, then, and Peter almost forgot she was constantly listening in. “*He means that he’s been chasing the spider all across Gotham to try and get information about him, but the guy is always just out of reach. It’s been driving Double R crazy.*”

“Yes, *thanks*, Oracle, for that.” Tim gripes, and Peter resists the urge to grin like a maniac. “It’s just- you know him, don’t you? He went after Ohnn. Is he helping you? Have you spoken to him?”

He’s been driving Tim on a wild goose chase? Or no, like a game of bird and spider? This is fucking *hilarious*. He likes bothering Tim (though Peter has no idea why), but to think he’d been able to bother Tim without even meaning to? God, he’s brilliant.

“Oh, *yeah*, we’re pretty close.” Peter says cheerfully, and Tim drops his hands from Peter’s shoulders, mouth open a little like he can’t believe it. Peter presses on: “We see each other all the time, really. Why are you guys looking for him, exactly?”

“To help with catching Ohnn.” Tim goes quiet for a moment, and Peter can see the gears turning in his head even with that mask on his face. Suddenly, the humor is a muffled, and Peter is forced to remember why he’s getting close to the Bats in the first place.

They’ve been looking into this the whole time, trying to keep Peter safe. They probably have leads that Peter doesn’t, they probably have an idea of how to stop him. If they work together, they’d probably be able to send Peter home pretty quickly. Peter could have been doing that, *working* with them, if he wasn’t such a coward.

“We really want to help, Peter. You know that, right?”

Of course I do. He wants to say it with all his chest. *I know you guys are safe. You’re good. You’re gentle. You’re friends.*

“...I do, *yeah*.” Is what comes out. Peter smiles softly, raising a brow. “Why do you think I’m bothering you?”

Tim is taken aback, but he recovers quickly. He reaches up to shake his hand in Peter’s hair, and Peter ducks, a laugh escaping him as he *lets* Tim catch him, for once. Even if it makes his

hair look ridiculous and stick up all over the place. “You’re not bothering me.”

Peter’s almost taken aback once again at how fond he sounds. All of them, with their stupid voices, sounding like they care about him just as much as they act like it. What assholes. Stupid jerks.

“Really?” Tim nods at him. “I guess I should try harder.”

Tim scoffs, dropping his hand from Peter’s head, and they continue walking again. There’s a beat where it’s just them, the silence, and an increasing weight on his mind where Peter wonders if this is the time, now. Second time’s the charm, right? Or. No. That’s not the phrase. He was close, though.

Peter gulps nervously, taking another second to pump himself up. He can do this. He’s got it.

“So, is Spider-Man really that hard for you to find?” He asks.

“No, I know where he is.”

“That’s a lie.” Babs says instantly.

“No it isn’t!” Tim squawks, and when he sees Peter’s look of disbelief, he presses on indignantly: “I know where he is! It’s just that he makes it *impossible* to catch him. One minute he’s in Coventry, the next he’s in the West End, and then seconds later he’s in the Bowery. Trying to figure out where he’s going next is near impossible, no matter how many simulations I run through. How do you meet up with him? Does he come to you?”

Peter squints, his steps faltering as he thinks on that. The thing is... He’s fast, but he’s not *that* fast. Is that an exaggeration?

Never mind, it doesn’t matter.

He has to say it. This is the perfect time.

It’s literally fine.

His stomach feels like it’s in knots.

Peter takes a deep breath to steel himself, glancing up at Tim in the corner of his eye. “Hey, Coup-”

“Oracle, I got the fuckheads out of the second house.”

Damn it all! Okay, regroup. This is fine, Peter, chill the fuck out. Peter just got the timing weird. It happens all the time!

“Copy that, Hood. Sending the location of the third house to you. It’s nearby where you are.” Babs replies easily, unaware to Peter’s dilemma. Some of the anxiety chips away when he recognizes that it’s Jason on the other end of the line (he was so busy freaking out, that he

hadn't noticed)- Why is it easier to picture himself saying it to their civilian identities than the vigilantes? They're the same people. Peter needs to be psychologically tested.

"Hey, Red Hood!" Peter can't help but grin. Jason would be chill about it, he thinks, if Peter told him.

"...Peter?"

Or *not*.

Something in Jason's voice sounds too strangled. Tim's shoulders tense as they walk, and he checks on Peter suddenly, reaching his hand out to pat his shoulder as if to make sure he's there. He doesn't look back at Peter, though.

"Yeah, it's me."

"What are you doing on the frequency?"

"He's with me." Tim says, and Peter can hear the way he pitches his voice up, keeping himself amiable. "Peter was on the train when Two-Face stopped it." Tim says, as if Jason probably wasn't fully aware of that, since Jason had seen them going to that station. "I am forced to babysit him."

"It's not babysitting, because I'm literally not a baby. We're bonding." Peter bumps into his side on purpose. "We're friends now, aren't we?"

Tim is taken aback by the casual way Peter asks, as if it made all the sense in the world. To Peter, it does. They've proven so far that Peter could call them friends. Not family, because Peter already has that. But friends, surely. They feel like it. Peter doesn't have a lot of friends. He has Ned, and he knows people at school, but that's about the extent of it.

"Right." Tim grins, and his spider-sense practically purrs *happy!* "We are."

"...And who decided to give Peter a comm?"

"That would be me."

"*Not **Batman?***" Red Hood says his name like it's a curse, and Peter feels a chill down his spine from here.

"...Hood-" Tim tries, but Red Hood barrels over him.

*"I know he can hear me right now. If you even **think** about it-"*

"Hood, now is not the time to talk about this." Tim snaps. Jason falls silent on the other end, but without him being nearby, Peter can't tell what Jason might be feeling. That only makes him feel more out of place.

Peter is, frankly, astonished. He hadn't heard Red Hood so volatile before, like he wanted to burn right through someone, down to the bone. No, not someone- He wanted to burn through

Batman. And what could possibly be the story there, that he'd sound so *angry*, maybe even a little hurt? Peter must have the question in his eyes, because Tim shakes his head and mouths *'Not right now.'*

Which... it's not like Peter was really going to ask. In all honesty, maybe it's better if Peter doesn't know their histories at all.

He's going to leave, after all. He'll never see them again once he's back in his own dimension. They're friends of course. At least, he would like that, and Tim has given the impression that that's okay, but Peter is also looking at them as temporary teammates. He doesn't have to know anything about their personal stories.

(It's the truth, so why does it tear Peter up inside? Why does it sting, like a cigarette pressed into his skin?)

Instead of interpersonal relationships, because trust that Peter will dodge that if he can, Peter asks something else that nags at him. "Batman has been listening?"

Tim has a questioning tilt to his head that makes him really look like a bird, in the costume. "You thought he *wasn't*?"

"Oracle said she couldn't contact him!"

"I meant that he couldn't speak to us. But Batman usually has his comm on, unless he's actively talking to one of us in person. He's been listening in the whole time, we just can't hear him."

"Huh."

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

Peter wonders just how well Batman was able to concentrate on his fight with Two-Face while Peter was blabbing in his ear... 'Too damn well' is the safest bet. The man is far too smart for his own good. No one tries to mask their body language and succeeds *that* well unless they're smart. Plus, Gotham's villains are very, very clever and tricky, from what Peter remembers from the wiki and what Gotham has told him. Batman had probably connected Peter's entire backstory and his connection to Spider-Man by now, just based on the train incident alone.

"Speaking of keeping comms on..." Tim has that air in his voice again, like he's hoping he'll cool down the hot coals before they could burn into smoke. "Hood, don't you usually turn yours off by now?"

Hood doesn't reply for a moment.

"Whatever."

“*You’re still on? I thought you left.*” Peter asks, and Tim is biting back the most shit-eating grin Peter has ever seen.

“So when it’s your favorite little problem maker, you’ll stay on comms to listen. But if it’s just boring old us, *your team and family*, you don’t. I see how it is, Hood. Have your favorites.”

Peter perks up, wondering what Tim could possibly mean by ‘favorite little problem maker.’ Tim snickers when he notices, something about that pissing him off almost instantly. He squints at Tim, the absolute biggest jerk in the entire universe.

“*You’re being obnoxious.*”

“You’re being obnoxious.”

Red Hood and Peter gripe at the same time. It only serves to make it all a bajillion times worse because Tim and Babs both laugh at them like it’s the funniest joke in the world (it’s not) and Peter thinks about crawling into a hole and dying. Because the universe will grant him small mercies every now and then, Peter spots the station, *finally*. To save from Tim mocking him, he runs up ahead.

“Peter, hold up!” Tim calls out, but Peter is already at the entrance.

He has to drop off onto the tracks when he gets there, because the platform doesn’t connect to the maintenance paths that these tunnels have. He tip toes in a hurry along the metal, chuckling at Tim when he manages to catch up.

This station is not the one that Peter had been dropped off at- that was further inside the University district. But from what Babs had informed them, it was nearby the edge of the evacuation zone, where everyone was gathering. The main force of the GCPD is up on the street, and Peter can hear from here all of the chatter and panic. Huge trucks and... maybe something like a tank? *Damn*. They pulled out all the stops for this, but how were they gonna get a tank in the tunnels?

He can also hear the amount of *people*. There’s hundreds, if not thousands, all clamored onto the streets, jam packed together. That’s likely where Peter will be able to meet up with Dick and Damian in order to get back to Benny’s. If they still want to take him, no doubt this was a long night for everyone-

Wait.

Right. Peter *won’t* be going back to Benny’s for a little bit. He has to tell them, and he doubts that they’d just let him drop ‘I’m Spider-Man’ and then fuck off to have the conversation another time. He got caught up again (he blames Tim for making him embarrassed.)

“Hey-”

“Step up.” Tim is already kneeling down, cupping his hands together to give Peter a foothold.

Peter looks up at the platform above him. It's pretty tall, and no doubt, Peter wouldn't get up there by just reaching. He'd have to do what Tim is doing- have Tim lift him up to reach the edge, and then Tim could grapple himself up just fine.

But Peter doesn't *need* the help.

Oh, this is gonna be *hilarious*.

Peter steps his foot into Tim's hold, sticking his hand onto the wall with a huge grin. He reaches his other hand up, and Tim's brows furrow in confusion when he doesn't reach up for the platform- it sort of looks like he's just bracing himself against the wall.

He's about to lift his foot out of Tim's hands when someone snatches his coat, behind his neck.

His stomach drops in a panic like no other, instantly letting go of the wall to grab the hand behind him in a vice like grip. Peter dangles above the subway tracks, picking his legs up to kick at the attacker that just *appeared out of fucking nowhere*-

safe! SAFE! fine! friend! safe!

Eyes wide and one foot ready to kick, Peter feels like he just saw a ghost. His heart stutters to catch up to his fear and panic, letting go of the wrist as soon as he manages to recognize this isn't a threat. Batman sets him down on his feet on the platform, letting go of Peter's hoodie and jacket.

Holy fucking shit balls, Peter has *never* had that happen before.

His spider-sense has been such an integrated part of Peter, ever since he was first bitten on that Christmas day. His certified Secret Keeping Therapist (SHIELD approved, then Tony approved, then *Natasha* approved), tells him that her theory is that it reacts to Peter's need for survival. He's constantly had to be aware of mood shifts, possible danger, how to act out a balance that keeps everyone happy and himself alive. Peter doesn't know what to think about that. All he knows is that his spider-sense has never *not* detected someone before they get near him.

Hell, Peter has scared the Avengers before with how fine-tuned his spider sense is. Natasha is the only one who's ever gotten that close- maybe Loki, too. But-

Batman has the nerve to smile at him. Or, his version of it. A thin white person smile, or close to it. Peter can't even bring his voice to work, too busy trying to catch up to what the fuck just *happened*.

He had gotten close enough to grab him! He'd picked Peter up and everything, and yet, Peter didn't know it was him or that he was *there* until it could have been too late.

His heart rackets around his rib cage, a wave of nausea overcoming him. *near* his spider-sense whispers when Tim grapples up to the platform. Peter feels like he's watching from a 3rd perspective as Tim and Batman talk.

It takes another millisecond that feels like a minute to Peter to understand that he's Slowing Down again. That's when his senses tune up to a hundred and Peter feels like the world around him is slow, but he's taking in everything so fast. His mind paces at a hundred words per second, coming to a conclusion that is written into the picture of Batman in front of him.

Batman did that on *purpose*.

Peter has sensed the man before, multiple times. Even when they weren't stalking Peter, and he was just walking around Gotham, Peter would know he's nearby and he would go the other direction.

He had wanted to meet in an odd place- why wouldn't he have Red Robin drop Peter off with someone Peter knows, or bring him back to Benny's, and then Red Robin meet him at whatever bat cave they hide in? Unless he had a *reason* to meet up with Peter, specifically?

"-right, Peter?"

"Huh?" Peter snaps back to it, unable to properly look away from Batman. His suspicions are raised that this is about to get difficult for them. Because Peter has never made anything easy, ever in his life.

Tim pats his shoulder, and something about his smile feels a little too much like he's connecting something in his mind. "Batman asked if you were alright."

"I'm great." Peter replies, trying not to bite stand-offishly. That's not what he set out to do today.

Batman crosses his arms, and Peter catches himself mirroring the pose a second too late to stop, otherwise he looks like the dork in this situation. *Whatever, Batman*. Peter tries to keep a straight face and not glare at him like he wants to. *Let's play this game*.

The man has a mission here, and unfortunately, Peter feels like what just happened had pieced something together for him. Peter's senses are wired up, his defenses raising no matter how hard he tries not to, and he can tell that Batman is studying him, like Peter is a puzzle to be figured out.

"What you did was so reckless that you can not even fathom it." Batman starts, and Tim is quick to jump in right as Peter's hackles raise.

"Bat, we've given him plenty of lectures." Tim tries, but Batman keeps his sight set on Peter.

"What were you thinking when you pulled that stunt?"

Peter narrows his eyes at the old jerk. Who does he think he is, lecturing Peter like he's one of Batman's multitude of kids? Like he's a Robin? Who does he think he is sneaking up on Peter?

"Maybe I live for the glory of it." Peter puffs up, indignant to his stupid face and stupid Batman authority. "Maybe I'm an attention seeking brat."

“Hm.” Batman grunts at him, and it almost angers Peter to see how the tension releases from him, like Peter had said something funny, maybe. “Somehow, I find it hard to believe that. I didn’t see a brat snatch a detonator from Two-Face or knock out three armed men then dodge a bullet that was coming at him from behind.”

“Excuse me?” Tim blanches, and Peter’s haunches raise.

He knows.

Peter doesn’t know why it makes his blood curdle to think of it. (He does.) This was exactly what he set out to do. But he also doesn’t know why his heart won’t calm down (he does), or why his skin sort of feels like it’s buzzing (he does), or why it feels like Peter was just issued a big fat challenge.

“You need to get your eyes checked. All I did was pull the emergency lever. I’m sure if you asked the other hostages, that’s what they’d tell you.” Peter is banking entirely on the help from two criminals, an old father, a grandmother with a temper, and nameless other people in that crowd, if Batman actually decides to ask them.

“I don’t need to ask anyone.” Batman sounds too sure of himself. Tim is looking between the two of them like it’s a tennis match- Peter, glaring down the big scary Batman, and Batman, who is surely aware that he’s looking at a venomous spider. Neither wants to relent first- or maybe that’s just what Peter thinks, because Batman says, “We’ll talk about this on the way to the Cave. It’s too open here.”

“To the what?”

There’s a brief click from his comm that sounds like Jason’s voice, but it’s cut off almost immediately. Like Babs had known to do it.

“Batman...” Tim sounds breathless, like it’s *not* a good idea. Peter agrees! He’s not going back to their *cave* to talk about it. No, not after the very *obvious* stunt the jerk just pulled. He *knows* that Peter is Spider-Man, he *has* to. That’s why he wanted to meet here, *with* Peter, and confront him about what he saw.

And damn, that’s what Peter wanted. But Peter’s always got a habit of swiping at a hand that tries to get close, and Batman just managed to make Peter want to prove himself.

Because *fuck* that. Peter is not about to let Batman *win*. For some reason, it settles under his skin like he’s been pricked by barbed wire. To think that Batman was able to sneak up on *him*? It was one thing when Black Bat did it. It just *really* grinds his gears that *Batman* did it, purely to mess with him.

Peter is *so* gonna get him back for that one.

“Yeah, *you* will. But *I* gotta get home and crash.” Peter turns on his heel and walks towards the exit leading to the street. He pulls the comm out of his ear and throws it on the ground, then reaches up to his hood.

“Wait, Peter, kid, we can bring you back to Benny’s!” Tim tries, jogging to catch up to him.

Peter pulls off three trackers from his hoodie and jacket, where Batman had grabbed his coat. He throws two down on the floor, and then smacks the third onto a poster of Gotham city on the wall as he gets to the steps. The anger cools for a second as Peter looks over his shoulder, building more and more into anticipation. Batman hasn’t moved an inch, watching Peter with a much wider grin than before.

He matches it- the smile, and the challenge. “See you later, *Batman*. ”

Neither of them follow him up to the street, which is good. But he has a feeling he’ll be seeing them soon. Already, a plan is forming in his mind. He’ll get Batman *back* for that jump scare he pulled. He’s going to make it the most obnoxious, inconvenient way to do it. It’s gotta be big enough that Batman will know Peter won’t be snuck up on again, and he *won’t* be ordered around like he’s a sidekick.

So caught up in his storm of emotions, Peter is relieved to feel his spider-sense acting as normal (though, so finely tuned at the moment as the paranoia sinks in that Batman could be following at Peter might not know.) *close near know! we know!* He glances up to see Bus Stop Guy.

No, Giovanni, Peter reminds himself. The guy has a name. Unlike Lanky and Shoes. They don’t get names.

It looks like he managed to get away from police questioning after all this time. Giovanni is handing out water bottles and quickly printed papers to people in the huge crowd. Everyone is packed together like sardines, and there’s a tension brewing from everyone, like true Gothamites that hate crowds. Peter slinks through them, trying not to touch anyone, as he observes the other people volunteering. He sees no sign of Lanky or Shoes with the man, nor Cane Grandma. Last he heard, Dick had went to speak to them, and wouldn’t it make sense to ask them where he last was?

It’ll be hard to find Dick in this crowd, and he kind of has to play along with the identity role right now, in order to get Revenge on Batman. (He’s starting to sound like a villain, but he swears this is more like a frustration fueled prank where his honor hangs in the balance. Great, now he’s talking about honor, like he’s Zuko.) Dick is probably...

Is Dick looking for him? He did just kinda get into a spat with Batman down there. What if he backs off from Peter? (Or is that just his insecurity sparking up?)

“Gio!”

His shout has the man looking up instantly. His eyes widen when he sees Peter, and he removes himself from the busy volunteers to meet Peter halfway. He grabs onto Peter’s shoulders, checking to see if he’s okay, with a smile. “Peter, kid, you’re alright! What happened?”

“I gave the detonator to Red Robin.” Peter leaves out the part where he hadn’t for at least an hour. “I stuck with him because he was worried there might be more goons in the tunnels.

But we were fine.”

“I’m glad,” Giovanni sounds like he really is. “I was worried about you. Hey, listen,” Gio grows unsure, but then shakes his head and grows more determined. “Who were you with when you were on the train? Were you by yourself?”

“I-” Peter dodges a someone pushing through the crowd to go yell at the volunteers. Gio sidesteps the man, continuing on.

“‘Cause I really don’t like the idea of leavin’ you by yourself tonight. Do you have a place to stay?” Gio is eyeing his clothes, and particularly the brand new coat that Dick got him. “If you don’t, there’s an extra bedroom at mine and my wife’s place. If you don’t mind a two year old asking you a billion questions, that is.”

He jokes, and Peter smiles. He’d only known the guy for a few hours, really. Gothamites like to play it like they’re all hardasses, but a lot of the people he meets are really nice. Well, they can be both. Gio *was* planning to stand up to Two-Face to help him.

“That’s really kind, but I was with, um, a couple friends. We got separated when I did that whole pick pocketing a rouge thing. Do you know if I might be able to find them?”

“It’s a pretty big crowd,” Gio looks around like it might help. He pulls Peter towards the outskirts of the crowd, towards the volunteer tables and the police barrier. He whistles to get a cops’ attention, and Peter pales.

“No, that’s not necessary!” Peter can’t deal with any identity whatever, nor does he have the heart to figure out if this cop is chill like Gordon or if he’s like every other cop. “I might be able to find them, they’re sort of celebrities, I think.”

“Huh?”

“Gio!” Someone else calls out, and Gio’s eyes snap up into the crowd. Peter swivels to search too, but for Dick and Damian instead. He can sort of feel a familiar sense, but it’s kind of hard in the-

there!

Peter spots Dick at the same time Dick spots him. “Found him! I’ll see you later, Gio!”

“Wha- oh, be good, kid! No more of the shit you did today, got it?”

“Uh huh!” Peter waves over his shoulder, hearing Gio call out for who Peter thinks is his wife, ‘Ales!’

He weaves through the crowd to find Dick. The older man is pushing people out of his way, and before Peter can even give a clever hello, he hears his spider-sense go *close safe hug!* and he only had a second to brace himself for a hug.

Dick has to lean over a little to hug him fully, because Peter will hit a growth spurt later. He wraps Peter up in a way that feels so familiar, that Peter finds himself blinking in the shock of

it. Dick holds the back of his head, pressing Peter's face into his coat, and the other holds Peter's shoulders, keeping him tucked away from the crowd.

"I'm so thankful you're alright."

No, Peter doesn't feel a lump in his throat, or his eyes grow a little hot. But he does hug Dick back, wondering *Why* it feels like he hasn't been hugged in years. He's gotten hugs before. They... stopped, for a while, when Ben died. He was used to them every day, so that took some adjusting to. But he's gotten them, sporadically, over the years, and then *none* for two years of not having a home. And then yeah, he doesn't get them all that often from his foster parents or his mentors, and it's mostly just Ned. But Peter isn't a clingy kid, or anything. He doesn't need hugs to survive.

He likes this one. It just feels overwhelming, though, like he's missed it, or something.

Peter pulls back first, and Dick graciously allows that. Peter thinks he does a decent job of hiding how shaken that made him, grinning up at him. "I'm glad you're okay too. I'm-

Peter almost struggles to say it. But it needs to be said.

"I'm sorry I did that. I mean," Peter backtracks. "-I'm not sorry I did it. But I'm sorry that I scared you?"

Dick's face melts from relief to what Peter refuses to acknowledge as fondness. He sighs, running a hand through his hair and looking far older at the moment, as if the stress had nearly killed him. "I'm *really* not happy that you did that, especially without telling me, but I'm, just... I'm just glad you're okay. But *why*? Batman was so close, Peter. You could have gotten seriously hurt, or worse. What would we have done then? What about your Dad?"

All valid questions, sure. But Peter will only answer one.

"My Uncle Ben and his family, they used to say that if you have the ability and opportunity to help someone and you don't follow through with it, then you've failed yourself just as much as you failed that other person." Peter finds it hard to look him in the eye, because the guy looks like a damn puppy dog, all sad and kicked like Peter had really terrified him. But he does meet his eyes again, and is surprised to see that the man is thoughtful, searching. Peter stutters out,

"I- I knew I could help, and, I mean- You were right there?"

Dick's brow furrows in confusion, and Peter realizes his mistake.

He *had* been confident that Dick would help him if it came to that, because Peter had been aware of everyone in that car the entire time. Dick had been crouched, ready to intervene at the first sign that it was going downhill. He was in perfect range to do that, and Two-Face was distracted enough. If Peter somehow failed himself, Peter trusted that Dick wouldn't let him fall.

But he can't say that. And he doesn't know how else to say it. Because Dick Grayson 'isn't' Nightwing. So he doesn't say anything at all- choosing to let the man make his own interpretation of that.

Dick reaches up to his hair, and Peter totally doesn't lean into the touch like a stupid kid. Dick has a broad smile on his lips. "Sounds like you're of sound mind. But we're gonna have to test that."

"Test what?"

"That you don't have brain damage!" Dick's other hand smushes Peter's face, and he gently shakes Peter around, pretending to check his head while grinning. "Or are you just an adrenaline junkie!? We gotta get you to a doctor ASAP! Were you dropped as a baby!?"

"Hey!" Peter protests, trying to release from the hold like a normal teen, but Dick insists.

"Come on, Crazy Peter." Dick teases, slinging his arm over Peter's shoulder and pulling him through the crowd. "Let's get you back to Benny's, yeah? You need a good rest."

"Two things: It's just Peter-"

"Had a convo with Lanky and Shoes. Sounds like your name is Crazy Peter."

"-secondly, where's Damian?"

"He went back to the library with Jason." It sounds like a lie, but Peter can't dispute it. "He's safe, and now I'm making sure you're safe. I'll walk you back."

He grins to himself. Tucked under Dick's arm, he already feels safe. His spider-sense agrees, always humming to him that danger is farther away when the guy is there. He has a lot on his mind: how the train incident went down, how Batman- and by extension, some of the other Bats too, like Damian- must know he's Spider-Man, how he's going to work around that and get his revenge for that jump scare. But for now, he lets his mind quiet, chatting idly about the crowd with Dick as they start their walk back.

He misses the news cameras. And he doesn't think about Ohnn, even once. There's just so much to keep track of, you know?

-

Boss is annoying.

Jonathan has never worked well under other people. He prefers to have his hands on everything, he likes to be the one that has the control, who can organize all of their work. He's never had that position, though. That power, the ability to be the best in the room. And lately... He's not of the soundest mind.

He's always had a temper. But it was never this *bad*, before. But Jonathan also knows his mind is slipping- always slipping, always just out of reach, ever since that snake bite.

He remembers how the fangs sunk into the skin of his arm. He scratches at his wrist now, unseeing of the angry red color. All he really feels is his skin, mottled with scales that grow more and more distinct by the day. It took his body a while to catch up to that wretched bite, to show the proper signs on any form of stability.

One moment, he's fine. He feels human, again, and the rage he has for Dr. Connors is stemmed. In another, he feels the bones under his skin as they stretch, as they *change*, as his body changes, and something else, something that hisses and spits in his ear, tells him he should tear into Dr. Connors' flesh and leave *him* as the one who is a shell of a man he used to be.

There's a spark from one of the wires, and his eyes snap onto it in an instant. Right.

Boss is annoying.

Jonathan is failing immeasurably. He hardly faults himself. He's not in his sound mind, not anymore. He knows that. If Boss wanted it done his way, he should be the one to go after Peter. But alas, the fool doesn't want to risk his body in the jump to the alternate dimension. Boss is weak.

Boss tasked him with finding a way that he could keep an eye on Jonathan. He had phrased it as 'Just to talk while you're there' but Jonathan is insane, not a fool. He knows that he wants more control, knows that he shouldn't trust Jonathan.

He hadn't meant to hurt Peter. But that snake that bit into his skin *did*. There's just something he wanted to tell Peter- and he knew that he could do that, with Boss helping him get the kid alone, without an Avenger in his ear. It just so happened that it aligned with Boss' own plans. That's the only reason- besides Boss' Help- that Ohnn agreed to even do this.

Boss is annoying.

"Are you even listening to me?" Boss snaps, and Jonathan grits his teeth. The fangs in his mouth make it harder to do so, because feeling them there reminds Jonathan that he is less than human, now. And that annoys him too. "Can you do anything right? You can't even listen to me when I'm speaking to you?"

"I'm doing what you *asked*."

"I *asked* you to get Peter and keep him in one spot. But *you* managed to lose him, and now everything has gone to shit. You can't even stop yourself from getting caught! I had to save you. You could at least do *one* thing correctly."

"What do you *think* I'm doing right now? Sitting on my ass!?" Jonathan hisses, standing up.

Boss' glare turns icy, and the tech in the room rumbles. Jonathan flinches back- not again. He doesn't want to see any of that again. No, he'll do better.

He sits back down, his head twitching as he tries to calm himself down- calm the snake. "I'm making the interdimensional communicator."

“What do you have so far?”

“I’m about to test it” Jonathan replies, hunched over his work. The screen in front of him flickers to life, showing him the log in. He types it out, making sure that Boss could see it too, so he knows later how to get in. Jonathan had to do a lot of work to make it hard for Stark to get close to them again. It was just in time for Boss to show their location from a storage unit in Queens rather than where they really are. But he doesn’t know how Boss managed to get there himself to leave a message for Stark without being seen.

Or maybe he does. Jonathan doesn’t like to think about the drones.

The screen turns to a standard interface home page. Jonathan hadn’t the time nor the material to make it as advanced as he wanted, and it just needed to be functional. He put everything else into making sure it was untrackable, for now. Stark is clever, he’ll figure it out. It only takes a minute for the screen to load to what Jonathan was looking for.

“What is this?”

“I’m making sure it is connected to their internet and cable.”

“Cable? Seriously? We just need to be able to talk to each other, not watch fuckin’ movies.”

“The *news* stations.” Jonathan wonders how Boss became the Boss of the operation. If he hadn’t had Jonathan, he’d be stuck going nowhere. The screen shows a couple of news pages, and then one news station on the other side. There’s a reporter talking, but Jonathan just checks that it’s the right one-

GOTHAM, reads the top, and Jonathan directs his attention elsewhere. But not for long.

“Do you see that?”

Boss has stood up now, pointing at the screen. Jonathan glances up, then goes still. Peter is standing with a man, almost hidden in the crowd. The headline that he had missed in his nonchalance stares at him, alerting him that he had managed to miss a villain attack in Gotham while he’s back in 1299 universe.

“Found him.”

Boss smacks the back of his head. “You’re lucky that he’s on the TV to prove he’s alive after all! What have you been *doing* all this time?”

“Spider-Man makes it hard to get anything done in that wretched universe!” Jonathan jumps to his feet, and Boss stands his ground. The drones lift up, and Jonathan reels back. In a blind rage, he chooses instead to kick his chair. It skitters across the ground and slams into the wall, denting the metal of the leg and leaving a scuff mark in its place. “That damned vigilante won’t let me get anywhere! I’ll be there for five minutes and suddenly he’s there!”

Boss is quiet as Jonathan collects himself. He leans away from the drones as if they’re sentient, as if he could placate them to leave him alone.

“...Spider-Man?”

“He managed to make some counter-tech to mine.” Jonathan hisses, putting his weight on his hands, trying to feel the cold of the table rather than the burning fury in his veins, spitting and desperate to bite. “Detects my jumps. And then he shrinks and grows, shrinks and grows... Always there, always bothering me. Can’t get to *steps* without him there. Bastard.”

Boss is quiet again, for a long time. He lets Jonathan cool himself before he says anything more.

“I want you to focus on catching Spider-Man or Peter.”

Jonathan looks up at Boss. He’s grinning to himself, staring out the window with amusement. He always makes that damned face when he thinks he knows more than other people. Jonathan doesn’t know what is so damned funny, or what he missed.

(His mind is no longer his, after all. It’s always a gamble on what Jonathan does or doesn’t know. What he can comprehend, and what he can’t.)

“Why?”

“I have a new plan. Better than before.” Boss scoffs, as if Jonathan should have been able to keep up. “This time, let’s see if Stark will refuse to bend and hand over that company, and EDITH along with it.”

Chapter End Notes

how we feeling??? I KNOWW we expected Spider-Man reveal but hey!! They know!! you'll see more in (literally the first scene of) chapter 8 how they feel individually about what's going on, *and* why Babs and Jason haven't clued Dick in on their thoughts about Peter being *so much* like him teehee <3

Damian and Peter act so much like brothers in this that i kept giggling while writing them. same with Tim and Peter, cause they're all closer in age.

Peter's "Revenge Plan on Batman to Prove I'm Better Than Him" is now underway and I can guarantee that Bruce did this on purpose. 100% he knew exactly what he was doing

Until next time, my loves! I'm gonna post the art I did for this chapter on tiktok like i've been doing, and y'all. i have been wanting to share this page for a week now... Don't be scared to bother me with comments on here or there, Ry and I see all of them and they aren't a bother! and to those who have been making tiktoks about LoF: thank you SOOO much!! y'all are literally so talented and we love you so much!!!! <3<3<3<3<3

p.s.: title is from "Bad Luck" by Jhariah! every time i listen to it, it feels like it belongs in ISTV or ATSV

i had a vision from the grey's they wanna co-sign

Chapter Summary

“Oops.”

“Oops? That’s all you have to say about that?”

Peter raises his voice to mock Tim’s. “That’s all you havetasay bout that?” He then jams his thumb inside, and steps onto the broken door to get inside the apartment. “Bombs in here.”

Chapter Notes

hello!! i'm back!! i'm gonna keep the beginning notes short and really talk in the end notes but i do want to say hello!!!

forgive that i hate action scenes and i can't write them for shit <33 this chapter... guys, i know, i am insane. but believe me, i had to CUT a scene from this chapter and put it in another. because this chapter is: 29,285 words. Approx time: 1 hour, 57 minutes

trigger warnings: talk about death, climbing out of a grave, PTSD, dissociation, stress eating, contaminated food, background character death (no beloved characters die), injury, bombings,

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jason has a list.

When he first came back and really *understood* what had happened to him (because there was a point where all Jason could feel and think of was black, and dirt, and bleeding fingernails, and then one day it was all replaced with *green* and blind fury), Jason had a list of everything that made him *angry*.

Laughter.

Nicknames.

The memory of a library.

Birds.

His hands.

The rain.

They were the smaller aspects of life around him that he couldn't escape. It built up inside of him, always crawling underneath his skin. It burrowed deeper and deeper, clawing it's way through his chest, wanting to rip him apart at his seams. It wanted him to be an unrecognizable person to who he used to be, before he was buried and laid to 'rest.'

Of course, he wasn't angry at those harmless ideas. He was angry about the *more* that came with it. He didn't stay up late at night sitting on a window sill of whatever random place he had stopped at for the night, cursing the *rain*. No, he hated that the rain reminded him of Gotham.

Gotham is always raining. It's always cold, too, no matter the season. Summer cold and winter cold were different, any Gothamite could tell you that. The rain on this side of the world wouldn't smell anything like Gotham's rain. It was clean, and the worst it could give someone was a cold. But rain sounds the same whether it's poison or not, and even if the rain was poison back home, it was *home*.

He wasn't angry about his hands. He was terrified to remember the feeling of crawling out of his grave. Of beating wood apart, of shoveling hard dirt and slick mud and reaching out to grab the grass with blood all over his hands. He was terrified to remember what it felt like to feel *nothing*.

He wasn't angry at the birds. He hated that when they flew up towards the sky, he'd remember the feeling of swinging, the sound of a cape fluttering behind him the way the birds beat their wings. He despised how it used to make him feel so safe, so much like he could really fly, and he could keep his home under his wing.

He didn't hate the library. At some point the couch that he'd lay on was soft, his head would be on the pillow, and the fire would be going. There'd be the ruffling of papers from both him and someone he called Dad that would lull him into a sleep where he wasn't cold, and wasn't scared. And he'd wake up either in his bed or with someone asleep next to him on the couch. Where no one would scream in his face or shake him or throw him against a wall. Someone's fingers would run through his hair absently while they would read side by side, and Jason was *safe*. And now he thinks of that library with bitterness, with a hurt that resides bone deep.

He doesn't hate nicknames. He hates that he used to have them, and he hates that they made him feel loved. When Dad would call him 'Jaybird' and he'd feel like he belonged in that big house, at someone's table, and that they thought of him fondly enough to place a credit to his existence. When someone that could have been an older brother had started calling him Little Wing, like Jason was someone that could stand next to him and wasn't someone he was truly ashamed of, after all. Because Jason spent so long thinking that he wasn't good enough, and he'd never be, and he couldn't live up to what someone else left behind. And sometimes he still wonders if he ever was, but that nickname made that fear feel farther away.

He doesn't hate laughter. What he hates is that he used to laugh, and it wasn't tinged with regret, or shame, or a petty and ugly thing like he is now. Jason hates that he used to be a

happy kid, and he was punished for it.

Jason has a new list.

It's a hard process, making this new list. Anger had always been easy, because Jason hadn't called it grief. It's much harder to think of the parts of his life that he is thankful for, that he trusts, or that he loves. Because loving was what got him killed. *Loving* had been why he hurt.

Jason loves the quiet of his apartment, when he can watch his brothers and his sisters breathe in their sleep, safe and sound and *alive, alive, alive*, trusting him despite Jason being a *broken, broken, broken* person.

He loves the drive through Gotham on his bike, every Tuesday, to pick up Damian. Who will always be waiting at the end of the block with his arms crossed, and will always pretend he isn't grinning when Jason promises he's going to show up to his art shows. He likes having somewhere to be, and someone waiting for him.

He loves late night phone calls with his friends- with Roy, with Kory, sometimes little Lian, when she sneaks Roy's phone. Knowing that someone will think of him, will know if Jason is missing himself again. The moments of time where he can forget everything else, just for this moment, and just enjoy being alive.

And Jason loves cooking.

He used to like cooking Before, too. It was something he only really got to try when he moved into Wayne Manor. He still remembers Alfred trying to learn what to do with him. Dickhead had just left, and Alfred was trying not to make Jason feel like he was there as some sort of substitute. Alfred, in a show of great grace, as he wouldn't let just anyone use his kitchen, taught Jason how to make Bruschetta.

The kitchen wasn't a quiet place, per say, but Alfred and Jason were both quiet people. When it came to Jason, he was quiet because he hadn't yet felt comfortable to speak. With Alfred, Jason felt like they didn't have to speak at all in order to be understood. So every night, Jason would wander into the kitchen, and he'd smell the food and he'd make it with his own hands, and Jason wondered if Alfred knew that for a kid who always wondered about his next meal before he came to them, this was like walking into the safest place in the world.

Alfred used to guide his hands when they kneaded dough to make bread. He'd watch over Jason's shoulders and mutter about how to see when the water was boiled hot enough. He'd peel potatoes methodically, and Alfred would hum a song from Bruce's childhood while he prepared the table in the other room. Cooking felt like home, like he could do whatever he wanted.

So right now, Jason cooks. Because it feels more like a night where being angry is easier, and Jason wants it to be easy. (He doesn't want it to be easy.)

He doesn't have the ingredients in his apartment to make Arancini or Risotto alla Milanese. He was too tired the other day to actually get off his ass and go grocery shopping. But Jason,

in an effort to feel anything but simmering anger, has found more than enough other ingredients around his kitchen to make enough food to feed a small army.

About seventeen paninis sit on a plate next to loaded baked potatoes, two pizzas are in the oven. Jason is currently stirring... a soup. He thinks. He doesn't know *what* soup he's making, considering he just went on auto pilot, but it smells good, and when he tries a taste, it's not an abomination, so he just continues cooking as if he left his mind somewhere else.

"Alright, you are officially out of ingredients."

"Hm."

Jason is staring at the wall over his stove, leaning one hand on the counter while stirring the pot with the other. Babs is in the open door of his fridge, already eyeing the pantry to make sure she's right. She is. Jason has officially cooked everything that he was planning to make last two weeks. The apartment smells like pizza.

"Are you planning to eat all of this?"

"Hm."

Babs is unimpressed with him. She can deal with it. Not like Jason hasn't tolerated that look from others before. When he was Robin, everyone but Bruce was unimpressed with him. Well, mostly everyone. There were a few...

"Alright." Babs wheels over, removing the spoon from his hand. He doesn't fully notice it until he's stirred with air for a few spins. That's when he finally averts his gaze from the wall and towards hers.

So, she's not unimpressed. Worried, is more like it. She does a great job of not shoving a pity party in his face, but sometimes she can't exactly hide that she notices when Jason is trying to shut down rather than feel an emotion. It's really terrible of her, he thinks. How is he supposed to stay on autopilot when she makes such a sad face at him? It's literally impossible to disagree with Babs. Ever since he settled back into the family, she's the one that he goes to when it feels like Too Much and he keeps remembering the During. His older sister understands more than anyone else.

"How about we start by eating some of the food that you've made?" She attempts. There's a snort from the kitchen island, near the paninis. When Jason looks over, the Demon Brat is sitting in one of his stools, holding the sandwich in his grubby little hands.

"You should try them, Todd, they're pretty decent."

"I made them." Jason narrows his eyes. "Of course they're good."

Damian shrugs as if this has no effect to his person. Jason tries not to add it to the list of things he hates. It's something good. It's not annoying. No, it's annoying. But it means that Damian is alive, if he's shrugging his shoulders and acting like a know-it-all.

The boy had been seething when Dickhead told him to come here earlier, like it was the end of the world as they know it. He put up a pretty good fight, too, making great points. Tim might have needed help, what if there were more enemies around, couldn't he at least help with the volunteers? But Dickhead shut him down with good points of his own: they had already helped as much as they could, there were confirmed no more enemies looting around once Two-Face was caught, and Tim was not under a pressure or time limit, and had mostly gotten his work done. So had Jason, Duke, and Cass.

But the brat still insisted he needed to walk Peter home. Dickhead said that he'd do it, and he told Damian to head to Jason's. Not *his* house, no. Not the big stupid Manor with Damian's own room. He told Damian to go to Jason's apartment, because for some reason, Dickhead likes to make Jason's life harder.

That's harsh. Jason loves the brat, whatever. But he's also a little shit, and says things like:

"What are you moping about anyway? You can't find anything more useful to do with your time?"

"You sit at my table and eat my paninis, and this is how you talk to me?"

"It's not my fault that you're having a breakdown." Damian chides, biting into panini. Jason considers taking the rest of it and throwing it out of the window.

"What Damian is trying to say is that maybe we should try to find something else to focus on." Babs tries.

"He knows what I meant."

"Bold talk for someone that can't reach their feet fully on the ground while sitting on that stool." Jason snaps, pointing at Damian's socked feet, which don't have Wonder Woman themed socks. That are actually way too familiar. "Are those my socks?"

"You weren't using them. My feet were cold."

"You could at least *ask* before you start digging around my dresser."

"You weren't here." Damian sets the panini down, gesturing to the apartment around him. "I was here alone. Who was I going to ask? Your ugly picture on the wall? Todd's Ugly Picture, can I wear these perfectly clean socks?" He turns fully to talk at a picture of Jason and Roy.

Jason takes back his stirring spoon from Babs and plops it into the pot on the stove of Mystery Soup. Trying to stir calmly and not homicidally is far more difficult than it should be, and Jason is wishing he could go back on autopilot, but it's too late now. He has to *think* again, which is always a curse.

"You're not seriously that angry about the socks, are you?" Damian is reeking with 'you look pathetic' and it only serves to make Jason's eye twitch.

"No." He grits out, and Babs sucks in a breath, wheeling over to the counter to grab herself a plate of loaded baked potato.

“So? What’s got your panties in a twist?” Damian leans his cheek on his hand, observing Jason with a calculated eye. It reminds him too much of Bruce when the damn man has a game going that no one but him knows about, that he expects someone to be clued in on.

Babs is silent now, picking at her potato with her fork. Damian decides he’s had enough of waiting for Jason or Babs to speak, because he scoffs, sitting up straight and gifting them both his disappointed, holier-than-thou attitude.

“Is someone going to speak up? Is there something that I missed when Richard so rudely made me come here rather than be useful?”

“It was nothing important.”

“Fucking bullshit.” Jason bites, and Babs raises a brow at him. Jason doesn’t care that he’s bitching at someone who would kick his ass or send out whatever blackmail she has on him. He glares down at his stupid Mystery Soup with his stupid spoon and wishes that the anger didn’t simmer like a boiling pot. “He’s trying to drag another kid into this shit, Babs. I’m allowed to call it out.”

“Jace, we both know that Peter would be far safer with one of us than he is by himself. I mean, he’s got no supervision besides us patrolling nearby. Ohnn wouldn’t be able to get near Peter if he was at the Manor.”

“So *that’s* what Todd is prickled about.” Damian sounds like he had already gathered something close to that, and when Jason looks back at him, the kid is smirking. “So, what, did Father finally bring him to the Manor? Is that where Richard is?”

“No, he didn’t.” Jason breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth, trying to cool down at the thought of another kid getting pushed into vigilante shit.

That’s what got Jason killed. That’s how he ended up having that list of what he hates. That’s how Jason found out what it was like to feel *nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*

“Peter didn’t let him get that far.” Babs explains to Damian, voice soft and tired. “I could only hear what was going on. He was talking to Tim and I like there was no problem, and then B came around and suddenly it was like the two of them were having a different conversation.”

“Peter sensed he’s full of shit.”

“B said they’d talk more about what happened on the train, back at the Cave.” Babs says, and Jason feels that electric spark of fury dig down into his spine.

The *audacity.*

After Jason had fully warned Bruce that he’d lose his shit if he even tried it, the World’s Greatest Dipshit decided to do it anyway. Because he can’t listen to anyone but his own damn self, like the egotistical shithhead that he is. It’s one thing that Peter is caught up in that shit with Ohnn and Tony, it’s another to bring him into their lives.

Jason fully knows that once someone enters that Manor, they never really are the same person they were before. Peter doesn't deserve them or their messed up way of trying to care for each other. He deserves a nice house with good parents and a chance to get far, far away from Gotham city. Gotham is a place that circles, and circles, and circles, generation after generation, person after person, until someone is left sinking down the drain.

(Peter is already too close. Jason knows that, too. Maybe that's why it's worse. Peter might already *be* family, if what he and Babs are looking for ends up being concrete. It lights his skin on fire to think that Peter could easily get caught up in this world of theirs and never know peace like he had once had with that Uncle Ben and Aunt May of his, before they died.

Doesn't he deserve that peace? If there's a chance, even the smallest one, that Peter could get out before he's tied to them, shouldn't they make sure it's taken?

Does that make Jason a terrible brother? Does it make him *more* awful, more unforgivable, to know that Peter could be family, could be a nephew, of some kind, and Jason wants the kid to make a break for it? Doesn't it just sting and twist in Jason's lungs that he doesn't want his brother to be a part of that kid's life? That's exactly what he's thinking, isn't it? It's not, because Jason wants his brother to be happy, but what about *Peter*?)

He doesn't know *what* Bruce was thinking, other than he wasn't. Because anyone with any common sense would be aware that Jason hates the idea of Bruce taking on another Robin, another *kid*.

"No doubt that he caught Father's attention after that stunt he pulled." Damian leans back on the stool, hands behind his head. "I think he'll fit right in, don't you?"

"Like *hell*." Jason leaves the stove, and Damian matches Jason's anger with a smug smile. "Bruce isn't dragging another kid into this life."

"Just when I was beginning to think you were resurrected *with* your brain, Todd, you manage to prove me wrong." Damian taps his temple. Jason's jaw clenches and he grips the kitchen island with his hands to prevent himself from losing his shit. "Think, zombie, think. For two seconds. He's *already* in this life."

"Just because he's getting dragged into Tony and Ohnn's shit-"

"Wrong assumption. You're not *this* stupid, are you? I believed better for you."

"Damian!" Babs interrupts, and Damian sighs as if this was all such a hassle and personal against him. "What are you getting at?"

"You tell me." Damian grins, tapping his fingers against the counter and looking pointedly at Jason. "Why *would* Father bring Peter back to the Cave? Hm?"

"Because he's an idiot who wants me to kill him."

"He noticed the potential in Peter." Babs says, and she only digs in deeper, unafraid, when Jason looks her way. "It's *true*, Jace. Peter did take the detonator from Two-Face, and he's a

clever kid.”

“Yeah, *kid*.”

“You’re both letting personal feelings cloud your judgment.” Damian rolls his eyes. “We all know *you* two want to steal Peter, but let me point out that Father meets *plenty* of children in Gotham that have potential like Peter does, or like Todd did. Let’s take out of the equation that Peter has Richard’s face.”

Jason and Babs share a look.

They’ve spoken about this a few times since they both made the connection.

It’s not like Peter has Dick’s *exact* face. They’re just very, very similar. And Babs had known Dick when he was that young, and Jason saw that picture, and they both would be remiss if they hadn’t noticed the similar humor, the anger, the overall just... existence, of them.

Peter has Dick’s mother’s eyes, if the one picture that Dick has of them all together can prove. He has Dick’s hair texture, those stupid dimples, the tan skin. Sure, the physical elements are there. But it’s just that... *Peter* is so much like him, that it’s hard to look over.

Their first thought was ‘son’, but *how*? Dick would have been 15 when Peter was born, it just didn’t make sense. And then they thought about Superboy, and thought, ‘*please no*.’

Peter has nothing tracking him back anywhere, no papers, no missing person’s case, no foster system. It’s like he didn’t exist- or, he was hidden away for a long time. There’s been references to people in his life: Tony, his ‘foster Dad’, who is an engineer, an Aunt and Uncle that took care of him when he was young, then ‘Happy’ and ‘Pepper.’

If Peter is a *clone* of Dick, mixed with someone else’s DNA... It just feels a little too much of a coincidence, everything that’s been going on.

And the reason they haven’t brought up this very important realization to Dick, the man centered around this?

As much as his worst fear is that he’d become just like Bruce, Dick sometimes can’t escape the curse. None of them can, really. And if Dick found out that this kid exists because of him, clone or son or whatever, it’s... not going to be pretty. Not because he’d hate Peter, no, not at *all*. It’d be the opposite.

Firstly, he would shut down near immediately. He gets tunnel vision sometimes, and with Peter *already*, he’s pretty protective. The kid has clearly had a hard life, and the ‘Grayson’ tacked onto a kid’s name that reminds Dick of the people he loves and himself? It would destroy Dick to think that he didn’t know about Peter sooner.

His older brother has a big heart. He’s the one that tries to stitch them all together, tries to keep the rest of them from drowning. Jason’s death was to blame for that.

(Dick and Jason hadn’t been brothers, when Jason died.

They had gotten so, so close to it. But for the better part of Jason's life Before, Dick had been so angry with Bruce that he was just... never around. Or if he was, the Manor was filled with screaming match after screaming match. They would go for hours, in a loop of yelling about the same things over and over again. And Jason had already come from a house of people who yelled. He had a fairly good idea (or so he thought, at the time) why they were always angry with each other: Jason.

Dick didn't really start coming around until shortly before Jason passed. In the After, Jason knows why Dick is so quick to love with his entire heart. He feels like how he treated Jason had been a mistake, and he can't bear to lose someone else. At least without them knowing how much Dick cared about them.)

He'd blame himself for what has happened to Peter up until now. And in the process, shut them out too, trying to find whoever is responsible for what happened and get answers. A pissed off Dick Grayson is not what anyone wants or needs at the moment, least of all Dick.

"Let's think outside of the box, yeah?" Damian snickers at them like a cat who has the cream. "What did Father figure out based on the facts of his case?"

"Damian," Jason says lowly, and Damian's smile actually does drop, as if he senses that Jason really *is not* in the mood for games. "Get to the point already."

"As far as I'm aware, Todd was left on Father's front doorstep." He says, looking at Jason as if to have him support the story. Jason nods once, and Damian proceeds easily. "He could do the same with Peter. 'Stay with the Waynes, you know them already, and their Manor is secure.' Or whatever he wanted to say. But he chose the Cave."

"Because he wants to indoctrinate Peter like he did with the rest." Jason hisses.

"No, because Peter is Spiderman."

A silence permeates over the kitchen. Babs stills, Jason's breath catches.

What did he just say?

Damian folds his hands together on the table. "Did you hear me? Or should I repeat myself?"

Peter is Spiderman.

Hold on...

Hold on????

Jason tunes out the sight of Damian looking all too pleased about their reactions to this. Instead, he's running through every interaction he's had with Peter in all the time that he's known him. *Raining, kid at gunpoint, panicking, breathing so fast, curled in on himself, looking for a way out, defensive-* then *witty, clever, random facts? he sounds like Tim sometimes, concerned about Red Hood's identity, lying to him about Ohnn, but he's making progress-* And he's thinking about Spiderman, and-

“That... Damn.” Babs breathes out. “I can’t believe I didn’t consider that.”

“You were far too focused on Peter himself. I expected better of you all, really. We’ll have to work on that, because honestly, it’s pathetic.” Damian hops off of the stool and brings his empty plate over to the sink. He turns on the water and grabs the soap, saying, “I mean, how many times have you interacted with Peter? I met him only a few hours ago and I saw it immediately. Father must have clued in the second he saw Peter on the train.”

Tim doesn’t bother knocking on the door. He swings it open while holding a large box in his hands, setting it down on Jason’s couch and striding into his kitchen without even a word of greeting. Jason is so caught up in the fact that he’d literally been *duped* by Peter, that he doesn’t really pay attention to it. Nor would he even if he wasn’t rethinking everything, because Tim always shows up unannounced and acts like he owns the place.

The time where Peter had those marks on his face from getting hit, that was the same night that Ohnn and Spiderman were reported to have been fighting in the city. Peter *said* that Ohnn had given them to him.

Well, no, he didn’t. But it was pretty much implied that’s what happened.

Jason *knew* that Peter wasn’t telling the full truth with them- all of them knew, because that was just plainly obvious. But (ugh, this is terrible to admit, even in his head) Damian might be right. He might not have seen Spiderman up close, but the description of Spiderman and his timing *and* closeness to the case just... makes sense. And Jason had been a little caught up in Peter and the fact that he looks just like Dick, and dealing with the Arkham breakouts, that it just passed him by.

He puts his head in one hand.

That little shit.

He scoffs, running his hands through his hair. At first, Jason feels a prick of annoyance at the fact that he missed something that obvious. No doubt that Bruce is going to make a huge deal out of it. How many times had he made Jason ‘focus on the bigger picture’? How many times did Bruce guide him through cases and make him take that step back to see everything that’s going on?

He feels annoyed, too, because he’d been so *angry* about Bruce trying to drag Peter into this, but Peter already *was*? The entire time? And then he gives himself that leeway, reminds himself of just what Peter was like, and everything else that’s on their plates, and he feels the annoyance give way.

In Jason’s interactions with Peter, he’d been more skittish than he looked level headed. In all honesty, the kid had done a 180 today in terms of confidence. Like, he’d spent the better part of the month running from them as civilians and trying to dodge them as vigilantes, then suddenly he just shows up and starts hanging out with them or purposefully talking to them first-

Wait a damn minute.

Peter *randomly* shows up a few days after talking with Nightwing on a roof and then running from them like a bat out of hell. Babs had been frustrated with them as if it had been their fault that he ran... They had been talking about Tim when he left...

Jason bites down a laugh, shaking his head as it hits him again: Peter knew, didn't he?

Peter only actually *talked* to them as vigilantes, and he would run out on them as civilians. And suddenly he does a U-turn and has the confidence to hang out with them for hours on end. And he's been acting suspicious during that same hangout, as if there was no problem with them asking questions. There's only one conclusion that they can make that makes *sense*. Peter figured them out.

Stupidly clever kid. He wasn't just there to sniff out the enemy, was he? With that stunt he pulled on the train, it's clear that he was trying to tell them. Or that he didn't mind them knowing, now that he knew them.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." He bites, and Babs raises a brow at him. But Jason can't put into words just yet how annoying it is that Peter was going to tell them, and then Bruce just *had* to get involved.

"How does it feel, Timothy?" Damian gloats, scrubbing the plate clean as Tim grabs his own panini. "To know that I figured out that Peter is Spiderman far before you did?"

"I figured it out around the same time that Peter talked with B earlier." Tim sighs. Jason glances behind his shoulder to spot his older brother hanging in the entryway to the kitchen, leaning on the door frame.

Dick looks tired, which is to be expected. His arms are crossed in a way that he looks more like he's hugging them than he is trying to be defensive, and his hair mussed up like he'd been running his hands through his hair a lot. He watches them all, that same expression he gets on his face when they're hanging out together and no one is trying to kill each other. Which means he looks like he just went through a tornado, and the tornado is going to come back, but at the moment, he's content and tornado free.

After what Peter had pulled on the train, no doubt that Dick had been keyed in at *least* by the end of it, if not during. If Jason had been there, he would have figured this out too, without Damian's badgering. When Dick meets Jason's eye, he grins thinly, nodding at the silent question Jason sends his way.

So, Dick knows about Spiderman. But had he put together... the other thing?

Jason doesn't know if he would, if he was in Dick's situation. If some kid he had no idea was his came around and was in Peter's situation, he wonders if he'd even be able to tell that the kid looks like him. Sometimes, Jason doesn't know his own face.

"I figured it out while on the train, and I'd already been suspicious *before* then. I'll make sure to put that down in the file on Spiderman, back at the Cave." Damian sits back down in his stool next to Tim, who doesn't even outwardly react to Damian. He scowls when he doesn't get a reaction.

“So, we all came to the same conclusion then?” Dick asks, and Damian turns fully around in his stool to point at Dick.

“You!” He declares, and Dick points at himself.

“Me?”

“You figured it out and then sent me here!? How could you!? Did you talk to Peter without me?”

“I talked to Peter, but not about Spiderman. I don’t think he knows that I know. And I sent you here because I didn’t want you interrogating Peter the second we saw him again... And I needed to make sure Bruce wasn’t going to do *exactly* what he did, but I was too late.”

Dick is bitter, and Jason feels a validation in that petty anger. Of course Dick knew B was gonna pull something. (Of course he sent Damian away, just in case he got into an argument with B. They don’t want the kid seeing that kind of thing.) They don’t exactly what that ‘something’ was, just yet, because Bruce hadn’t said much else to them after that. All he had said was that they were done for the night, then brought him and Tim back to the Cave.

(Reportedly, as Babs had been the one to inform him of this, since she *kicked him off the comm*. ((Yes he is still bitter about it.))

Jason eyes Tim now. Out of all of them, Tim knows Bruce the best... In a way. Jason still doesn’t know exactly what their dynamic is, but it’s one where Tim knows Bruce in and out, and he’s the only one that could ever get away with lying to Bruce’s face. *Somehow*. And not only was he with Peter and Bruce when their conversation happened, he also had driven back to the Cave with Bruce. Which means that he knows what happened, and he probably knows exactly what Bruce is really up to.

If Tim is aware that Jason is expecting him to speak up and offer some wisdom for the class, he doesn’t show it. Tim picks at his panini, pulling out the slices of salami and piling them neatly on his plate.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jason growls, reaching over the counter and taking the panini away from him. Tim blinks at his empty hand, then casts his stupidly creepy blue eyes up at Jason forlornly.

“I don’t like salami.”

“Then pick a different panini!”

Tim rolls his eyes, and like it’s the most obvious thing in the world: “The others are vegetarian.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Damian turns to face the freakazoid salami picker.

“This really doesn’t matter as much as you three think it does.” Dick sighs, bringing his thumb and pointer finger to his eyebrows. A habit he has when trying to relieve a headache.

Tim opens his hand for his panini back, and Jason reluctantly gives it to him. No sense in making Dick's headache worse.

"What *did* B do?" Jason asks.

He holds the record in how fast he can make a room tense. Besides Damian, the others are fully expecting Jason to go grab a new duffel bag. But as much as Jason felt like being angry a few minutes ago, he doesn't have the heart in him right now.

"...I don't know." Dick says, and Tim purses his lips like he can sense that their older brother is looking at the back of his head. "I haven't gotten to ask yet."

Tim is looking guilty, picking at the rest of the salami. Jason wasn't there for whenever they met up on the way to Jason's apartment (nor does he know when they did, because Dick was dropping Peter off), but just based on Knowing Them, he knows that Tim dodged Dick's questions or tried to distract him, and Dick is being overly gracious about it.

"Firstly, how is Peter?" Babs interrupts. But really, she doesn't, because Tim was shoveling a panini into his mouth like he would die any second now without food and he was in no position to answer. Another attempt at dodging, no doubt. Jason pulls the plate over to himself so he can eat the salami and not let it go to waste.

"He was fine, really. I thought he was angry at B from what I heard on the comm towards the end of their conversation, but he didn't show it, if he was?" Dick shrugs, and a stupidly fond smile crosses his face. "Actually, he was more concerned about getting food. We can trust that Benny guy, by the way. It was enough that his record is clean, but he's also a pretty nice guy. When I dropped Peter off he was waiting downstairs, gave him a lecture I think *Alfie* would be scolded by, and then fed him, like, five burgers. He's pretty content."

"That's good," Tim reaches for a baked potato. "-I thought he was freaked the fuck out by B."

"He *did* pretty much imply he was about to kidnap Peter."

"...I was talking more about the scaring the crap out of him." Tim muses, putting an *obscene* amount of butter on the baked potato that Jason had made with all of his dissociational hatred, like some kind of freak that Tim is.

Any and all fondness on Dick's face is replaced by a calculated expression. It makes Jason look down at the salami, and Tim winces. That's the very familiar 'Dick is going to yell at B' face.

"Excuse me?"

"I was helping Peter up onto the platform and B snuck up on him." Tim explains slowly, having the nerve to meet Dick's eye. Dick isn't angry at *him*, but Dick getting angry at Bruce is not something any of them would like to see. They've gone an entire year without a fight, from *any* of them. They don't want to break the record.

"Snuck up how?"

Tim grabs the scruff of Damian's jacket, not letting go even when Damian slaps at his hand. "Drake, put me down right this instant!"

"He reached over and grabbed him like this. Peter looked like he saw a ghost, he sort of spaced out for a second. And then they were having some kind of cowboy stand off. B *smiled* at him. "

"No he didn't, Mr. Pants on Fire." Jason protests instantly. Tim, still holding onto Damian's jacket, whips his head around to look at Jason, scandalized. Damian starts to take the jacket off, slumping down and slowly sliding off the stool as he sticks his head through the hole.

"He *did*!" Tim insists. "It was a bona fide *Batman* grin, I'm telling you. I was *right there*."

"Are you *sure*, Tim?" Babs winces, and Tim squawks in betrayal. "I'm just saying! It's a little hard to believe. B just fought Two-Face, you know how he gets after a Two-Face fight."

"Broody." Jason scoffs. Babs nods.

"Yeah, broody."

"I am *sure*, okay?" Tim heaves a dramatic sigh, letting go of Damian's jacket once and for all. Damian, having just freed himself, grabs the jacket back and jumps behind Tim to strangle him with the sleeve. Tim knocks back off of the chair, then swoops his arm back to try and grab Damian.

Dick walks over and separates them with practiced ease, pushing them away from each other. The two give up the fight but not without glaring at each other from either side of him. Dick sits down in the stool in between them, brow furrowed in contemplation.

"What is it, Dickhead?" Jason can tell when something catches Dick's attention.

"Hm? Oh, nothing." He shakes his head. Jason wants to pressure, because it sure *sounds* like something, if he's pretending it isn't. But... Babs and Jason have been keeping their own things to themselves, and Dick would not take kindly to being pressed to keep them in the loop without them doing the same.

It must show on Jason's face what he's thinking, because Dick adds on, "Just thinking."

"Dick, can you help me with the POB?" Tim asks. He walks over to the couch to grab the big box he came in with. From here, Jason can see there's already a few items inside the box.

"Oh, POB's a good idea!" Babs grins.

"Why are there so many shopping bags in there?" Jason raises a brow. Though he already knows the answer.

The guilty party smiles, rubbing the back of his neck. Dick spins in the stool, trying to sound innocent. "I got Peter a few things..."

“By a few, he means several jackets, shirts, and an ugly baseball cap.” Damian rolls his eyes. “Richard was practically trying to buy the whole store. Peter had to talk him down.” However, he pauses, looking over at Tim. “Would anyone like to tell me what a POB is?”

“Peace Offering Box.” Tim replies, digging through the box to start looking at the clothes inside. He pulls out a horrendously orange Pumpkin Pi shirt that Jason hopes Peter will burn. Hell, Jason will do it for him. “Remember we got Barry one after his last mission in Gotham?”

“That box with the absurd amount of food was a Peace Offering?” Damian scoffs incredulously. “If he can’t handle working with us, then he should just say so. He needs to keep up.”

“Number one: he’s literally the Flash. If anyone is catching up, it’s us. Number two: that’s exactly why we had to send a POB. We also gave one to Steph... a few times, actually. Oh, shit.” Tim’s eyes widen like a deer in headlights. “She’s at the Manor right now.”

“Um, yeah?”

“Did anyone tell her?”

“Tell her what?” Damian asks, but Babs goes “Oh.”

“About everything that went down tonight. And about Peter, being Spiderman?” Tim winces. “She’s gonna be pissed that she slept through this...”

“Maybe Duke or Cass caught her up to speed.” Babs offers, already pulling out her phone to shoot a text Duke’s way.

Tim recovers quickly enough, though he mutters something about possibly needing another POB. He stuffs the Pumpkin Pi shirt into the POB, coming over to Dick to rest a hand on his shoulder. He gives him a fake-solemn look, as if the request is far more serious than filling a box with things that someone would like or need.

“For no reason at all, I need your help with something in Jason’s room.”

“First my Wonder Woman socks,” Jason laments as Dick jumps to his feet and hurries after Tim to Jason’s bedroom, where his closet that he *just* organized is going to be ruined. “-And now this. Maybe I need to die again so they’ll feel bad and stop stealing my shit.”

Babs has no sympathy on his plight. She just laughs at him, setting her phone back down on the table. Damian, on the other hand, turns on them the second that Tim and Dick are out of the room. He puts both hands on the table.

“There’s no use denying it to me.” Damian whispers, keeping careful watch on the hallway to Jason’s room. “Peter is related to Richard.”

Jason and Babs mimic Damian, both glancing towards the hall. Jason leans over to hiss, “Be quiet, Demon.”

“I literally whispered.” He retorts. “I know you two have been investigating this without telling him. What did you find?”

Jason would really prefer to *not* have this conversation within potential earshot of Dickhead, but Damian isn’t going to let this go. Babs presses her lips together, mulling over what to say and what not to.

“...It’s hard to say.” She settles on. “But based on the fact that there’s nothing *to* find, so far... There’s two options.” She holds up a finger. “One: Peter is Dick’s son. There’s a 15 year ago gap there, and it could be explained. Two-”

“Time travel.”

“-He’s Dick’s clone.” Babs and Jason both blink at Damian. Babs laughs in shock. “Hold on, what? You think it’s *time* travel?”

“It could be a possibility.” Damian presses, though he sounds more unsure than he had a second ago. “Peter appeared out of nowhere, has no records of his existence, is related to Richard, has training and experience being a vigilante. If he was a clone, where had he been made that we didn’t already have eyes on, and where would he have trained and operated at that we wouldn’t have noticed? He also has an enemy that we knew nothing about until recently, who also popped up around the same time as he did. He’s socialized with people, he has a history that he clearly believes in, so unless they gave him fake memories, he’s existed since he was a child. And he knows our identities, and had been avoiding us for a while. Unless somehow, he figured out identities while you all were hanging around him?”

Damian pins them both with a look. He...

Well, okay, that does sound a little reasonable. Time travel isn’t an *impossible* theory. However:

“I think if Time Travel was involved, the speedsters would have sensed something was up by now.” Babs reminds him. “There would have already been other signs that time travel was used. And him being a clone explain some of your points too. Appeared out of nowhere, has no records of existence, is related to Dick.”

“But-”

“We have eyes on the existing spaces that someone could make a clone at, but someone could have their own lab that we don’t have access to. That would also explain how they’d have the space to raise Peter and train him, and... experiment on him.” Babs frowns at that.

It’s still unclear if Peter is a meta or not. Dick doesn’t have a meta gene, but whoever he was cloned with could have one. It’s either that, or Peter was mutated instead, which would likely mean experimentation. Peter *had* been very, very wary about telling them anything about himself.

“As for the enemy: he could just be a new rogue. And for the memories... Peter could either be lying about his past, or given fake memories. We’ve seen something like that before. The

Riddler has done something like that.” Damian frowns at her words, but he isn’t outright opposing them. “And for the identity parts... Jason and Dick were talking about Tim, and I think that’s when he connected us. Though I’m unsure how that led back to our identities, unless he figured out Tim, and by extension, the rest of us.”

At this, Damian smirks. He leans back on the stool, putting his hands behind his head. “So what I’m hearing is that Timothy got us caught.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Babs reminds him.

“Uh huh, sure.” Damian has definitely not let this go. “Todd, your pizzas are burning.”

“My what?” Jason is taken aback, but then freezes. There’s an odd smell in the air like burning bread, and Jason hurries over to the oven in a panic.

He opens the oven and smoke comes billowing out. He coughs, putting his nose into his shirt in an attempt to not breathe it in, and grabs an oven mitt so he can pull out the two pizzas, one by one. Babs wheels back to get away from the smoke, and of *course* this is when Tim and Dick come back with the stupid box in tow.

“This is why we don’t dissociate while cooking.” Babs mutters.

Dick leans over the smoking, charred bits of the pizza. “I think it’s edible still.”

“Get out of my apartment, I beg of you.”

-

The last thing that Peter expected when he was so rudely awoken four mornings after the train incident- on Halloween day- was to have Loki appear in his room. Nor did he expect that Loki would be reading his books, and actually look interested in them.

Peter had sat up in the bed and squinted at Loki as the God Alien Whatever sat at his desk, thumbing through the first Percy Jackson book. Loki ignored him, continuing to read as if he belonged there. Which is sort of true, considering he has every right to be there, because he’s helping Peter out, and it’s not like Peter is going to kick him out. Peter *has* been anxiously awaiting his return.

Since Peter had not fully grasped the concept of being awake yet, he crawled out of the bed and went to his bathroom to wash his face. It wasn’t until he came back into the room that he even really processed that Loki was there at all, let alone reading. Peter had watched him for a moment, and was *mortified* that instead of sounding cool and chill about this, his voice had cracked so *abysmally* when he asked:

“*What are you do-Ing here?*”

So bad, in fact, that Loki stopped ignoring him and raised a pointed brow. Peter thought about dying for a few seconds, and before he could walk out the window to follow through on that thought, Loki had decided to grace Peter with a reply.

“Nice hair.” He had said, and Peter would not be able to fix the bed hair (half of it sticking up at a 90-degree fucking angle because the universe hates him) for the life of him.

Obviously, Loki had come here just to tell Peter what everyone is doing and also check if Peter himself is still alive and doing good. Peter would appreciate if this happened a little more *often*, but Loki just being here and willing to tell him is enough, for now.

And Peter eats up every word that Loki gives him.

Back home, it appears that Tony and Natasha are the ones fully on the case. Steve has been helping them, but Loki says there’s always something going down. The rest of the Avengers are currently handling separate incidents. (Which is fine, ‘cause Peter would never expect nor *want* the entirety of the Avengers to come looking for him.) Dr. Banner had recently come back and he’s been sitting with Tony, the two of them trying to figure out ways to get around no magic-users being available to come get Peter by making the way to this universe by themselves.

Here comes the bad news, because there’s always bad news to go with the good: Ohnn had showed up, and apparently with him came the knowledge that he’s definitely working for somebody, or has a partner in all of this.

Peter had also theorized this way back when he first got here, because of how strange Ohnn is, but it’s nice to have confirmation once and for all. Peter didn’t really appreciate thinking that he could start fighting Ohnn and someone else would get involved without him knowing. But the *who* that could be working with Ohnn is hard to predict, and there’s a suggestion that made Peter’s skin crawl.

They confirmed that there were drones that helped Ohnn escape from Tony and Steve, and that they had been sent from the direction of OSCORP tower.

Peter, in true Peter fashion, has *never* discussed the full story of just how he got his powers. All that he would really tell anyone, including Tony, was that he had visited OSCORP and he had gotten the bite a week before Christmas Day, the year he turned 12 years old.

So of course, the idea that they are directly involved with kidnapping Peter is not a good one. In fact, it makes him sick to even think about it. The company that did this to him having hired Ohnn or... Well, they don’t know the relationship there. Even outside of them potentially knowing that Peter is Spider-Man, there’s the fact that Tony has not been kind on them since he found out they were involved with Peter’s mutation.

Business deals are cut, they get snubbed at all those charity events and galas and shit, Tony isn’t quiet about his dislike for Norman Osborn, etc. It’s almost hard to imagine that they *wouldn’t* hate Tony after that, because their investments have been dropping ever since. And if they found out that Peter was Spider-Man, on *top* of the shit with Tony? It’s not looking good for them.

That’s where Loki came in.

He went looking for what could prove their involvement in this, but found nothing in the company itself. Since the encounter with those drones, they hadn't seen signs of Ohnn, either. The technology for the drones isn't listed anywhere in OSCORP's private servers, which means they hit a snag trying to locate who is responsible for those drones. It could still be OSCORP, but without the confirmation, they have to find other avenues to look at.

Loki had clearly been about to ask Peter about his spider bite, and because Peter likes to pretend that day never happened, he had interrupted with the first thing that popped into his mind: updating Loki on his life since he last visited.

It leads to what they're doing at this moment.

Peter's room is littered in notebooks, pens, markers, and his work tools are strewn about on the hardwood floor. Peter sits among the chaos, scribbling everything down in his notebook that he has set on his crossed legs. Loki is standing at a whiteboard filled with notes about radar meteorology, nanite technology, and "theoretical" physics, adding onto the equations. But what he's really interested in:

"I just knew you had it in you." Loki muses, an uptilt to his writing on the white board that shows Peter he's in a great mood. That, and the amused grin on his lips. "I thought that those mindless Avengers would try teaching you to be 'responsible' and 'make smart choices'."

"They do that."

"-but there's a spark of defiance in you that I believe should be far more encouraged." Loki continues on as if Peter hadn't said a word. Peter rolls his eyes at this, but he does think it's... sort of *cool* that Loki likes this story so much.

Loki is actually a really great listener. Even when Peter rambles and loses the point of what he was trying to say, Loki will ask a question and bring him back on track. What started out as something that felt like a mission report turned into Peter getting excited to tell Loki what happened next.

He told Loki everything that happened since he last saw Peter: going to the library a couple days after he saw Loki and figuring out the Bats' identities (Loki had smirked at this and wouldn't clarify what that was about), meeting counterpart Happy when he was all freaked out and finding out about Tony and Pepper in this universe (this time, Loki had pressed for details, and Peter regrettably didn't have *that* much to go on, just his inferences).

Then he told Loki about meeting Robin and befriending the Bats as their civilian identities, going shopping with Dick and Damian, going to the fair. Now this, Peter figured, wouldn't be that interesting. But Loki had asked all about the details of the fair, and he didn't seem to mind that Peter talked about his feelings around Dick, which are really confusing. Loki hates feelings, which means it's suspicious he asked, but Peter doesn't know just what he could do with this information to hurt anyone, so he lets it slide.

During that conversation, Peter felt like he was catching up with an old friend at a sleepover. The side ramblings about Peter wanting to add nanites to the Jumping Radar had interested

Loki, and Peter had asked about Loki's thoughts on Tony and Banner's work (he wants to see what they wrote down, because it feels good to see their progress).

So while Loki is writing down what he's seen of Tony and Dr. Banner's work, Peter had told him all about Two-Face, the detonator, and messing with the Bats. Loki thought this was the funniest thing in the world, and Peter only preened a little bit at making him truly laugh.

"What I wouldn't have given to see their faces when you showed you had that detonator... Perhaps I shouldn't go back so soon."

"You want to stay?" Peter's head shoots up. He hadn't expected *that*.

Immediately, he's torn. Loki staying means that Peter wouldn't be alone all the time. Sure, he has the Bats, sort of, but they're not from home. But on the other hand, Loki staying means that Tony and Banner will be down a heavy hitter, and it sounds like Ohnn and this mystery partner of his spend more time in their home universe.

Loki shakes his head. "No, not actually. As great as the story is, I would rather die than live in a place so filthy. This entire city is mottled with a curse that makes me feel like I am stepping in horse shit."

"...Have you stepped in horse shit?"

"Not the matter." Loki waves him off. "Continue. What happened after you gave Red Robin the runaround?"

Peter snickers a little, looking back down at his notes. Little Legs is crawling on Peter's shoulder, trilling next to his ear. Peter raises a finger to pet them, mulling over what happened next. And that's what makes him sit up straight and claim:

"Batman is going down!"

Loki looks away from his work, eyebrows raised up high. He tilts his head at Peter. "I would be remiss to point out to you, Spider, that proclaiming that you are going to fight a *hero* might make some believe you are a *villain*."

Peter's face flushes red, and he sputters out, "No- I didn't- I meant- Not like that..." He huffs, turning his hand with Little Legs to watch them crawl and avoiding Loki's eyes. "I meant I'm gonna get him back."

"Not any better."

"*Ugh!*" He groans, flopping onto his back on the floor. He bonks his head on the Percy Jackson book, then decides to use it as a pillow. A very hard, not comfortable at all, pillow. "Okay, so like, Oracle had told us to meet Batman at a station, and I didn't think much of it until I got there, right? When we got there, I was gonna tell Red Robin about me. Actually, I was gonna stick to the wall and then climb up it and scare the bejeezus out of him-"

"Bejeezus can *not* be a real word."

“It is because I said it.” Peter pouts at being interrupted. Loki lifts one hand up in surrender, tacking on to one of the formulas up there without missing a beat. “But before I could do that, Batman snuck up on me.”

Loki pauses again. “On *you*?”

“Yeah!” Peter is glad someone else is here to recognize how crazy that is. “My spider-sense hadn’t felt him coming at all! He picked me up, Loki! He got close enough to *grab* me, and I didn’t know he was there. Actually, he was super lucky my spider-sense recognized him and my reflex to kick him didn’t go through.” Peter knows that wouldn’t have been a pretty sight. He still has a hard time pulling his punches.

“Batman is a mortal.” Loki’s brow furrows. “How would a mere human, no powers or anything like it, figure out how to get around your spider-sense?”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Peter throws his hands up in exasperation. “And I *know* he did it on purpose, too. I dunno what his game is, but he definitely challenged me.”

“What did he say to you?”

“Well-” Peter pauses. “He, um... not really anything like that.”

Loki goes quiet, and Peter peeks up to see that he doesn’t appear impressed.

“Don’t give me that look!” He sits up again. Little Legs crawls into Peter’s hair, settling behind his ear. “He challenged me! Firstly: he *grinned* when he realized that he got me. Secondly: he directly pointed out to me that he caught on to my spider-sense on the train-”

“What did he *say*?” Loki insists, and Peter groans in frustration.

“Can’t you just take my side?”

“I can not believe that *I* am saying this, but quit being dramatic.” Loki flicks the air between them, but Peter feels the flick on his forehead. Peter smacks a hand over his eyebrows and *does not pout about it*.

“He was like,” Peter then lowers his voice to that stupid Batman growl thing, and Loki is flabbergasted by the flawless impression (in Peter’s oh so humble opinion). “‘*What were you thinking when you pulled that stunt?*’ and then *I* said, ‘*Maybe I live for the glory of it. Maybe I’m an attention seeking brat.*’”

Loki chuckles at that, setting the marker down on the whiteboard and giving Peter his full attention.

“And then he was all like ‘*Hm.*’ Because he speaks in grunts, apparently,” Peter rolls his eyes. “And that’s when he said, ‘*Somehow, I find it hard to believe that. I didn’t see a brat snatch a detonator from Two-Face or knock out three armed men then dodge a bullet that was coming at him from behind.*’ Which means, clearly, that he knows! He figured out not only Spider-Man but also the spider-sense, because he’s a big fucking *nerd*.”

“Sounds like you’re just bitter that the man knows about spiders.”

“It’s my *thing*, Loki!” Peter whines, because he is so allowed to. “Like, Spider-Man! Spider-sense! It’s like a friend! My spider-sense has never let me down! No one sneaks up on *me*. Except maybe you. But it’s expected of you.”

“Good to know you do not have an ego about it, though a tad hypocritical considering you had scared Red Robin prior to that.” Loki points out, but what does *he* know? Red Robin and Batman totally deserve it. Loki contemplates his next words carefully. “So, *why* does it bother you that *he* did it?”

Peter doesn’t know. How is he expected to know? Something about Batman makes Peter want to be a rebellious and annoying teenager. Before, it was just because Peter had trust issues but Batman’s reactions were funny. But now, it’s like... “He challenged me.”

It’s just that simple. Batman challenged Peter, and Peter is not a loser wimp who backs down.

“Where was the challenge?” Loki reiterates.

“Trust me, if you were there, you’d know what I mean.” Peter thinks, anyway. Is this just something that he and Batman only understand? “I dunno, I think he knew I must have been following them at some point.”

“You followed him?”

“Just for a little bit!” Peter protests how Loki sounds proud of the stalking. It only gets worse when Loki is grinning like he’s all too pleased that Peter had done this. “I wanted information on them, and they were stalking *me*, so it seemed only fair! But after the train, I think Batman wanted to show me without *telling* me that he knows about my spider-sense and that I’m Spider-Man. I mean, he knew it would press my buttons for him to assume I’d be going back to the BatCave with them.”

“The *what* now?” Loki scoffs as if actually offended by the name. “Who do I have to blame for that ridiculous name?”

“Nightwing.” Peter answers absently, too busy thinking about Batman.

Peter’s right, isn’t he? Peter knows damn well that Batman knew he wasn’t going to go back with them that night, identity reveal or not. And Peter *also* knows that he’s walking right into a plan of Batman’s, though he doesn’t know just what it is, just that the motivation is probably a kidnapping. Jason had told him Batman has a problem with that.

But trap or not, Peter always finds it hard to back down from a challenge. Batman basically said, ‘*Your turn. Show me what you got.*’

Well, if Batman wants to see what Spider-Man is made of, Peter is gonna *show him*.

“I guess what I’m getting to is... Um...” Peter hesitates.

How many times have the others talked about Loki? How many ‘delightful childhood stories’ had Thor told Peter about, where the gist was ‘*don’t trust Loki without expecting something crazy in return?*’ The answer is: Peter has heard this so many times. But Loki isn’t *all that bad*, now that Peter’s talked to him a few times. So Peter looks up at the other, and hopes that Loki is feeling amused and gracious enough that he will help Peter out.

“What’s my best chance at getting Batman back?”

He’s never seen Loki light up so fast before. A grin splits across his face and he turns the desk chair around to face Peter. When he sits down, he folds his hands together and is eager enough that he leans forward, delighted by this outcome.

“I have been *waiting* for this day to come.” Loki hums, a dastardly twinkle in his eyes, like he’s sharing a secret with Peter. “You are talking about just something that is in good humor, are you not?”

“No stabbing.” Peter clarifies. “Thor told me all about your pranks as kids. When I say I wanna get Batman back, I mean like, I wanna mess with him. Like... Oh, like ‘confuse, don’t abuse.’”

“Have you ever read ‘The Art of War’?” Loki asks suddenly. He shakes his head no, and Loki takes a moment to think. Peter’s never much delved into literature outside of textbooks and sci-fi, or whatever May had been reading when she was alive.

“What could war have anything to do with this? It’s just a prank.”

“A prank that you want to be successful, right?”

“Yeah, but-”

“There are many aspects of the Art of War that can be applied to any situation. Whether it be war, a prank, or your life itself. You forget that I grew up among Asgardians.” He explains, and Peter listens with rapt attention. It’s been a minute since he’s gotten a lesson from someone knowledgeable. Loki clicks his tongue as if he expected that much. “You mentioned to me that you feel as though you are getting to know Gotham well.”

Peter nods, a bubble of excitement building up. He’s learning from the God of tricks and stories. And that God *was* actually paying attention to what Peter was saying earlier. Loki is a lot nicer than people give him credit for!

“You might be getting to know Gotham, but these heroes have known Gotham all their lives. This is their territory that you are stepping on, Spider.” Loki points out, but Peter already knew that much. “You do not know the terrain as well as your opponent, that much is non-negotiable. But what you *do* have is an ability to play to your strengths. Know yourself, and know your enemy.”

His brow furrows in thought, and Little Legs makes it’s way towards the back of Peter’s neck.

“My spider-sense.” Peter says, when it’s clear Loki is expecting something from him. The eye crinkle tells him he’s got it right. “But Batman found a way to get past that.”

“This is *your* ability, Spider. You will be surprised what one can do when they listen to themselves. *Adaptability* is another lesson. Adapt your tactics and strategies to the changing circumstances.”

“Alright...” Peter nods, hoping that Loki is right. Peter wants to win this challenge that Batman has for him, and he’s definitely going to prove that he’s not going to be a *sidekick*. Peter supposed that to start with... he’d have to figure out *how* Batman got past his spider-sense in the first place.

“Lesson two: Deception and Surprise.” Loki says. “Mislead them about your intentions, feign a weakness.”

“Like ‘Get Help’?”

Loki freezes, and then a scowl crosses his face. He narrows his eyes at Peter like he’d just uttered a curse upon Loki’s name. “What did that fool *tell you*.”

Peter, not looking for that kind of problem (never get in the middle of a fight between siblings), chooses to change tactics. “What ‘s lesson three?”

Loki grows quiet, but accepts that it’s not important right now. “Avoid Protracted Warfare. Meaning you cut the enemy down swiftly and precisely. Unless, of course, you plan to play the long game.”

Just as Peter is planning to ask what could count as a long game, Peter’s spider-sense flail up. Little Legs’ digs into his skin as if sensing Peter’s own worry, scurrying to keep out of sight. He lets go of the pen in his hand so as not to break it when he tenses up, and a moment later, Loki has cut himself off mid sentence, also feeling someone approaching them. Peter’s eyes snap to the window-

there friend hello! hello! hi!

-just as two boots land on the fire escape. He freezes, knowing in his heart of hearts that this is a *terrible* time for Signal to be on his fire escape with a big box in his hands.

Loki doesn’t disappear as Peter expects him to, nor does he change forms in an attempt to hide. Peter is confused, but he doesn’t know *why*. It’s not like Loki *has* to hide, there’s not really a reason to. But it feels like Loki *should* be hiding, because Peter’s pulse has skyrocketed higher than the damn space station.

Peter’s eyes widen and he doesn’t have the heart to stand up to greet Signal. It’s almost comical what the scene is at the moment. The room looks like a mess of coding and formulas on a big whiteboard, tools and smaller engineering projects that Loki was helping him with on the ground- oh shit! The Jumping Radar is in plain view on the floor. Peter kicks it under the bed just in time for Signal to open Peter’s window to catch the two of them.

Signal- *Duke*, Peter reminds himself- stops halfway through stepping into the room. He balances the big box on the sill, his mouth dropping open in small surprise. *watching watching tense nervous tense watching!* screams Peter's spider sense when Signal spots Loki sitting next to the white board.

Loki, because his face is just built like that, gives Signal the most suspicious, Corporate sleaze-bag smile, and waves at him without a word, relaxed as can be.

"Um. Hello." Peter manages to get out. Signal's attention snaps to Peter sitting on the ground.

Signal's heart is racking around his chest despite looking so outwardly calm about the situation. He brings himself all the way inside the room, dumping the box onto Peter's bed. *watching watching watching*. Peter's own heart feels like it's fluttering. It's like he's gotten caught red handed, but he doesn't know why. This is worse than that time May caught Peter trying to make that erupting volcano science project in his newly cleaned, carpeted room.

"Hey, Peter." Signal greets with an easy smile. He nods at Loki, but doesn't take a step closer into the room. Honestly, he's great at appearing like something about Loki hadn't freaked him the fuck out. "I'm just dropping something off for you. Little box of essentials. We, uh, thought you could use them."

"Could have used the door." Loki suggests. Peter closes his eyes, praying for peace.

Though Peter can't see Signal's eyes, it feels very much like he's looking at Loki when he asks faux-cheerily, "This a bad time, Peter?"

"N-No, all good. We're all good. Time is great." Peter stands up. It takes only a couple steps to reach the bed with the box on it, and Signal is opening it up for him to look inside. Peter tries to look calm, he really does, but based on Loki shooting him an amused eyebrow, he likely doesn't succeed.

"I haven't met you before." Signal says, maybe to both Loki and Peter. He pulls out a pink and white container of- food? Yeah, food. Excellent. Peter loves food. Real life-saving thing, food is. "I'm Signal. Friend of the Bats, but 'course, that's a little easy to tell."

He's probably referring to the multiple bat symbols on his suit. The big white one. The one on his helmet mask thingy.

"Yeah, you're pretty cool." Peter says without thinking. Which is true, 'cause Signal is pretty cool, but the timing of his words makes Peter want to bash his head in. "I'm Peter- ah, sorry, you already... knew that. This is, uh-"

Loki doesn't offer up his name, leaving Peter fumbling like the rat he is. He doesn't even look at Peter, just at Signal, who's leaning to look at the whiteboard with the work that-

"-Tony."

-has been doing... that Loki...

No...

No...

Peter winces as soon as it hits him what fell out of his own mouth.

He did not just say that. He didn't. What is *wrong* with him? He was thinking about how he hadn't actually told the Bats his identity yet and he was literally just talking about pulling a prank on Batman, and he considered that maybe it wasn't the *best* idea to get caught before he could do anything. But seriously?

He felt like he couldn't say 'Loki' without it sounding like the weirdest or fakest name ever, but he couldn't pick *ANY OTHER NAME*? He thinks about Tony for a second and he runs his mouth? He seriously needs to get a fucking GRIP! First he had blurted out 'Grayson', when Peter had several other options to choose from and he had nothing going on in his head. But now TONY??? His poor foster dad that the Bats probably think still abuse Peter even though that is certainly not the case?? He just gave that to *Loki* to have?

Peter needs to throw himself into the sun.

No- he needs to dig a very large hole, burrow far deep into the ground, and let his body rot into nothing but dirt.

tense worry not happy!! !!!! !! tense bad bad dislike

It's like Peter has a habit of pressing the worst button possible. It's like he looked at a huge switchboard full of buttons that said "safe option" and his dumb ass tripped and bonked his forehead onto the button that said 'literally the worst ever do not press unless you want everything to go wrong'. Which would be hard to put all that onto a button.

Loki stands up instantly, not caring that Peter is looking at the window behind Signal like it might not be too late to make a break for it. He reaches out to offer his hand to Signal, who hesitates, but shakes it. They both have a tight grip. Signal is probably doing it to intimidate Loki, but Loki is 100% doing it to bother Signal.

Is the prank even worth this?

... Batman *had* messed with his spider-sense.

But Signal didn't do anything!

But Batman messed with his spider-sense! Who's to say Signal isn't gonna run and tell the other Bats everything that happened here the second he can? Batman knows Peter is going to retaliate but Peter should at least be able to keep the *how* he's gonna retaliate to himself!

"You're the Tony I've heard so much about?" Signal has the fakest smile on his face that Peter has ever seen.

"Yes, that is me!" Loki has the realest smile on his face that Peter has ever seen. "I'm sure it must be a pleasure to meet you, Signal."

Yikes. Okay. Peter pops open the container of food to avoid looking up at the scene in front of him. He doesn't care what it smells like, looks like, or even if it might be poisoned, *whatever*. He shoves whatever it is into his mouth and stress eats as the two men talk.

Oh. This is rather good, actually. (The food. Not the peril that Peter is in.) *Great*, even.

"I have heard a lot about you as well from the child." Loki says, reaching into the box to pick up a jacket that's inside. It's a leather one that looks pretty worn, and Loki hums at it apathetically. Signal's jaw tenses, and Peter takes a slow breath. "What is all... *this* for?"

"These are just some things that we thought Peter might want or need." Signal replies, a significant effort to keep his voice light. "Some jackets, scarves too. Heard that he might want some new pants. A friend of his brought him the bags that he left at the library the other night."

"Well, isn't that so nice of them to go out of their way like that?" Loki muses. "What were you doing at the library, Spawn?"

Loki knows damn well what Peter was doing, because he was literally just telling him all about it. Peter picks up the metaphorical shovel, trying to reason that this is his business and Batman doesn't get to know about it until Peter has *decided* he can, and replies, "I went to visit some friends."

Peter uses his hands to shovel more of the mystery food into his mouth. It's like heaven. What is this? They're little balls of fried something, with rice on the inside. And cheese. He likes rice, and he likes cheese. Peter's never had something this good before. Isn't that swell?

"We noticed that Peter might want something new to wear. And you know, it's getting cold outside." Signal gestures to Loki's coat- ah, shit, the very nice looking coat that Loki wears 'cause he's extra. Peter, in comparison, has been wearing the same two and a half outfits for the past month, and here's Loki wearing a nice coat. "Nothin' to it, really. Just wanna make sure the kid's warm and safe, right?"

Rice balls. Peter is adding this to food he likes. He has a list, you know.

Much better than the list of crimes he's committed. Pick pocketing, stalking... Grand theft auto- that was a misunderstanding. Art theft... That one was Black Cat's fault entirely. She told him she was stealing it from some rich schmuck that stole it from someone else and Peter got it returned to the right place in the end. Loitering, once. Some computer crime...s...

"Oh, yes, sure." Loki sounds noncommittal to that, and Peter wonders if Gods have alternates of themselves, in these silly dimensions. Which God can he ask to turn back time? "Hey, you."

Peter is mid-way through shoveling what must be the fifth rice ball into his mouth. Loki and Signal both look at him. Peter is sweating profusely in his pajamas. "Fuh?"

That meant to come out as 'Yeah?'

“You should thank Signal and his friends.” Loki says. Peter regrets thinking that people gave Loki too much shit. Because he’s making this the Worst Experience Ever on *purpose*.

Signal is *not* pleased by what he’s seeing, despite Peter looking So Casual and Cool and Calm and Chill about this. Peter swallows his food before he can choke while trying to speak, his face getting red when he *still* almost chokes, and while wanting to die a million times over, Peter says: “Thanks, Signal.”

“It’s not a problem, Peter.” Signal reaches over to ruffle his hair, smiling as nicely as he can. And Peter knows he’s trying, cause it’s clear that Tony-Loki being here just pisses him off. Didn’t someone tell Peter that Loki just has that aura about him? That people get pissed sometimes when they look at him, even if he hasn’t done anything?

Peter closes the empty container (holy crap, he stress ate so fast, cause that thing was full of those rice balls) and he spots a sticky note he hadn’t registered, sitting on the top. There’s neat, cursive handwriting on the pink sticky note. “*This is suppli. Hope to see you soon- Alfred Pennyworth.*”

He almost laughs.

“Um, and thanks to Mr. Pennyworth.” Yes, thank you, Alfred Pennyworth, for giving Peter something to eat, but also for gracing Peter with something *stress eat*. That made everything more bearable.

“I gotta get going, Peter. Stay safe, alright? No more stunts.” Signal claps his hands, but he’s not happy. Peter observes how his feet remain steadfast on the ground, and how he seems to be leaning forward ever so slightly, like he could jump to protect Peter at any moment. Signal wants to stay. He wants to make sure Peter is safe- from ‘Tony.’

Peter is going to figure out how to catapult himself into the sun. For being an awful awful person. *Just for a little longer...* Just long enough to prank Batman and decide where they go from there.

He smiles, hoping to all hopes that the message gets across. *I’m fine please don’t freak out. I’m okay just trust me on this.* “I’ll see you soon!”

It’s with that that Signal leaves, not shutting the window behind him. It takes another few strained seconds where Peter is listening to the vigilante’s footsteps actually go away and not stick around in order for Peter to relax at all.

“Oh my *god*.” He flings himself face down on his bed and lets out a huge groan. “This is just *great*. Why didn’t you stop me? No- Why didn’t you-”

bye friend! gone!

Peter pushes himself back up to look around his room. Loki has left him as well.

Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy? Why why WHY him?

He sits up on his bed, looking at the mess around him. He's... got a lot to clean up. And reflect on. And think about, in general. Like Batman, and the Bats, and how they're totally gonna freak about Loki-Tony. And-

"Whoa!" Peter gets a good look at the jacket that Loki had picked up. It's a black, leather biker jacket. There's only one patch on the arm, something that Peter has seen on some kids before when he was passing by Crime Alley. It's a red square with a white border, and coming out of the frame is a black eagle in flight.

His eyes glance over to his desk, where a sewing kit he got a few days ago is waiting.

...Maybe Peter can contemplate what Loki taught him while he gives the jacket a few more patches.

-

Bruce likes to think that after all this time of being a father, that he knows his kids well. Or, well enough. He could never be so arrogant as to assume he knows what is going on with his kids at every second of their lives, even if he would prefer it that way.

('Father' as much as he can be, because he still feels like he falls short of that role every time.)

He knows that Tim isn't as hung up on coffee as everyone worries he might be. Not to say that Tim doesn't have an unhealthy attachment to it. It's just that when Tim isn't so caught up on a case or school work or whatever has caught his eye, his boy is more prone to take power naps anywhere and everywhere than he is to pick up the coffee mug. He once caught Tim sleeping curled up on the stairs, one book in his hand as if he had decided midway through going downstairs that he wanted to sleep.

And Stephanie, she *loves* flowers. Adores them, is the better word. She likes to arrange them in perfect spots around her room or her apartment and she has a book about the flower language memorized, because it was a gift from her mother. Every Sunday, Bruce sends her flowers, along with Barbara and Cass. Stephanie loves the flowers the most, and she always sends him a picture of the arrangement in the nicest spot she could find for them.

He likes to store away the memories of their habits, keep them close to his heart so he can look through them when everything in the world seems all too dark and brutal. Just as he remembers Jason's love for Jane Austen, Duke's appreciation for Christmas lights, and Damian's fascination with planetariums, Bruce remembers Dick, and that fiery passion he bore for all to see.

He remembers his first son who laughs when he leaps, arms spread out for flight. He remembers anger that ripped through even the mightiest of men, and he remembers playing games with Dick on the nights where patrol was slow.

Games like 21 questions and Eye Spy, when they were still new to each other, still trying to gain a common ground. The games went from learning stories about each other, like that Dick had once gotten his tongue stuck to a pole somewhere in Minnesota and went cliff

diving when he went to Greece one year, became something more set in their present time. They had a game about naming the strangers on the street and giving them backstories based on what they saw- dreaming up lives for people. Dick always held a hope for them, always gave them happy endings.

Eventually, Bruce learned that Dick always responds to a challenge.

Alright, maybe Bruce had learned this from Alfred, and it wasn't a trick that he learned all on his own. Bruce himself had not been an easy child to raise, especially not after his parents passed. One night, Bruce was at his wits end trying to figure out how to keep Dick from getting bored and not listening to him while they were out- Bruce himself, taking away the Batman persona and the shiny car and tools, was not *that* interesting to be around, no matter how hard he tried to connect to this kid. At least, in his opinion. So when Alfred told him a secret he'd been using on a stubborn Bruce for *years*, and it had worked?

He'll always be grateful that Alfred has been with him all this time.

A challenge that he'd give could be as simple as suggesting a race to the next stoplight, or how many pick pocketers they can spot, or being the first to say 'Banana' when they see a yellow car.

Or, it could go deeper. When he knew that Dick needed to look at a case with fresh eyes, but knew the boy wouldn't take kindly to the reminder (sometimes days were bad, days where grief started to stain and grow bitter), Bruce would challenge him to a game of chess, or a puzzle, and Dick would let the case sit back in his subconscious while he was so focused on beating an 'overconfident' Bruce. He'd jump up from his seat with the biggest grin on his face when he managed to one up him.

This technique also worked when Dick was being particularly stubborn. Which is why, when Bruce looked at Peter and saw Dick at his most heel-dragging, kicking and screaming, petty and headstrong, he knew that unless Peter got to know Bruce, the kid would refuse to take a step into the Manor or the Cave. No matter if he had told them that he was Spiderman or not.

Spiderman... if Bruce hadn't been so used to the fact that teenagers will near *always* choose the option that stresses out the adults around them the *most*, he would have lost his mind when Peter pulled that stunt on the train.

It didn't take much for Bruce to connect that Peter is Spiderman, not after seeing him in person again after looking at the Spiderman case. The boy who was smack talking Two-Face (so, *so* not a good idea) had the same personality from the sticky notes left behind, and from the bewildered witness statements. Bruce, just like Damian, wanted to see what Peter was up to. He knew that Peter had some kind of plan, and it involved talking to Two-Face directly or getting close to him. The best course of action at the time that kept Peter from getting shot or killed was to go along with the set up he had been given, because of Peter.

(That is how Damian had barely got away with not being grounded for not stepping in. It was *only* because Bruce had done pretty much the exact same thing. Bruce has learned his lesson on being a hypocrite- his kids will point it out so fast they would all get whiplash.

Though because Bruce had done this, Dick has been giving him the cold shoulder these past few days. This is much more preferable than the screaming matches they used to get into, but it still is not good at all. Bruce just hopes that when this works, Dick can forgive him. Getting Peter into the Manor sounds like a good apology for the case with his first son. Not so much with Jason...)

Peter definitely lived up to the curiosity that he and Damian both had. Bruce was very, very concerned with his safety, so there was not a *chance* he would have let it get too far- if Harvey hadn't let Peter go, Bruce wouldn't have listened to Dent, end of discussion. Bruce was hoping exactly for that outcome, and was relieved when Harvey let Peter go, keeping Peter out of the direct line of fire.

That's when Bruce saw him switch the pen for the detonator.

Peter is a brilliant, clever, and persistent kid. Bruce doesn't know where he came from or what his past truly is, but he saw his son in that moment. He decided then and there that Peter would have a room set up in the Manor within the day.

(Maybe he does have a problem. But who can blame him? This time, the kid has his son's face.)

But he knew that Peter wouldn't go back with them, even if he was planning on telling them his identity. (And getting interrupted while doing it.) He has some sort of trust issues and had actively avoided them for weeks as civilians. He constantly kept up the secret identity despite knowing at a certain point that they would be able to help him. Why else would he do so if not because he likes to keep people at arm's length? That wouldn't change if he had told them his identity. Peter would still not come with them, and the goal is to get Peter home.

So Bruce defaulted back to what he knows used to work on Dick: a challenge. A game. Something to get to know each other.

That sense of Peter's is truly incredible, he hasn't seen anything like it. It's not so much just the boy's hearing as it is the ability to detect danger around. And not so much 'danger' as it is sensing vibrations in the air, like a spider. That must be where the name comes from, right? Spiderman has the webs, the ability to stick to walls. Bruce had a hypothesis that Peter likely had the same ability... Getting past that to sneak up on Peter meant risking a hit from a meta or mutant that can stop a bus, but it was a risk he had to take. It also explains that ability of his of always knowing when Batman was nearby.

Although he will admit he hadn't meant to spook him so badly. It's probably a testament to just how well that sense of his works, if he had been so shaken that Bruce got past it. He wonders just how many people are able to do that.

Peter took the bait- willingly. He likely knows that Bruce has a reason for this challenge, likely thinks Bruce just wants to see what he's made of. Tough, kid. Bruce is a master of the long game. He'll sit it out, wait however long it takes for Peter to dance closer and closer to trusting him.

There's nothing like a good game to bring people together. Even if the game is that Bruce is asking for this kid to prank him.

Damian is across the library, laying on the ground underneath Titus. The Great Dane is laying all of his weight on Damian's chest, his black fur glittering more towards brown in the sunlight. Damian pets him idly, his eyes closed and somehow comfortable on the ground like that. Tim, on the other hand, is sitting across from Bruce at the table. He's just awoken from his third nap of the day, and he still manages to look tired, but he's staring Bruce down while Bruce thumbs through the newspaper. He prefers the old fashioned way to get the news, sometimes, and Riddler is expecting Batman to have done today's crossword puzzle.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Bruce glances up at Tim after five minutes of no movement.

"What are you up to?" Tim asks, blunt as ever. Bruce grins as he turns the page.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"With Peter." Comes the dry response, telling Bruce that Tim knows he's being dodgy. "You stopped him from telling me. Why?"

Bruce takes a moment to reply. Sure, he could have let Peter tell them, and try to challenge him anyway. However, he knew that his children had figured it out nearly the same time that he did, so they wouldn't be missing that information. He also knew that Peter would be more likely to accept the challenge if he had a reason to.

Reason: Batman managed to get around that sense of his, after all that time of using it against him.

"I have a hunch." Bruce tells him. Damian peeks open an eye from where he lays. "About this time tomorrow, Peter will already be at the Manor."

Tim continues to stare. He's always had a talent for seeing through Bruce and being able to read him. It's why, to no discredit of his other children, Bruce believes Tim might really be the World's Greatest Detective. Just young, and in need of the wisdom of having a fully developed frontal lobe.

"Alright." Tim concedes, after finding what he wanted by staring Bruce down. He lays his arms back onto the table and rests his head, closing his eyes.

"...Alright?" Damian presses, sitting up. Titus moves to rest his head on Damian's lap instead. "*Alright?* That's it? You have nothing else to ask, Timothy?"

"What else is there?" Tim mumbles.

"Oh, I don't know, how about 'Father, where do you believe Peter came from?' or maybe 'What is the hunch?' Common sense questions that come from deductive reasoning. I know you have it."

Tim lifts his head back up to look at Damian. The younger boy crosses his arms, already resuming his stance to not let this go. "Why don't *you* ask, if you want someone to so badly?"

“Fine. I will, if you won’t.” Damian looks at his father. Bruce grabs his pen to start the crossword, preparing himself. “Father, I believe Peter is a time traveler.”

“That isn’t a question, chum.” Bruce writes down **Creeds** in 4 across. A creed or credo is a profession of faith, or a system of belief or principles. “Why are you so sure?”

Damian hesitates. Bruce casts his gaze towards him, making sure it’s a normal hesitation and not something he missed. It appears that Damian is just reflecting, and not put off by Bruce doing the crossword as they talk.

“...Todd and Barbara already had this discussion with me.”

Bruce tries not to let Jason’s mention sting too much. He just hopes that Jason comes around- Batman does *not* need another Robin, but Peter sure needs someone to take care of him, even if it isn’t Bruce himself. Being at the Manor is the best option, unless they want to hunker Peter down in one of Jason’s safehouses by himself, or in Dick’s apartment in Bludhaven that only has one *real* bedroom and is constantly a mess.

“We’ll get our answers in due time, Damian.” Bruce writes down **Kinship** for 12 down, and **Attachment** for 16 across.

It is at this moment that Tim’s phone rings- the lyrics to Backyardigans blasting so loudly that Tim jumps out of his just gotten sleep, and fumbles for his phone. Blinking back into alertness, he puts the phone between his shoulder and his ear.

“Mm- Duke?” Tim rubs his eyes blearily, then goes perfectly still. “Whoa whoa whoa, slow down, dude. What’s wrong?” His tone makes both Bruce and Damian sit up straighter. Bruce abandons the crossword on the table as Tim’s eyes widen- both disturbed and shocked. He makes eye contact with Bruce. “You *what?*”

Tim is already putting Duke on speakerphone.

“-is a fucking god!”

“Slow down, son.” Bruce says calmly.

Duke sounds panicked, almost, but mostly he sounds angry. Which isn’t all that normal to hear from him- actually, it’s not that normal to hear from him on the phone when he’s out on patrol. He’d use the comm line to talk to Babs first, unless his first instinct was to call one of them personally.

Damian is now on his feet and standing at the table as well, arms crossed and glaring at the phone. Before he could demand to know more, Bruce interrupts. “What’s going on? Start at the beginning.”

Duke takes a moment to collect himself, but when he speaks again, it’s dripping with dislike.

“I met Tony.”

Now that catches all of their attention.

Tony, as in the man they hadn't been able to even confirm *exists*? Bruce was just about to go looking into unsolved cases they haven't had any alerts on to see if he ended up being connected to those. Tim had even considered at one point that Peter also knows Tony doesn't exist, and was lying to keep himself from getting reported as a homeless kid.

The more that Duke catches them up, the more angry he sounds- his voice rising and trying to take a deep breath, but then getting angry all over again. *"When I dropped off the POB just now, he was visiting Peter. Some sleazebag looking dude- I mean, seriously. Seriously! Never met anyone with a sketchier face! And Peter looked so freaking scared, too? He stress ate all fifteen of those suppli that Alfred made for him while I talked to Tony. And this dude? He fucking sucks, man! I talked to him for all of like, five minutes, maybe less, but I wanted to punch his stupid face in!"*

"What did he say?"

"Is Peter okay?" Damian asks. There's a glimpse of fear in his eyes, as if already expecting the worst. Bruce rests his hand on Damian's shoulder, and Damian leans into the touch.

"He looked unharmed?" Duke doesn't sound too sure. *"He was pale and sweaty and definitely stressed out. Tony didn't offer much- he just said that he heard about us from Peter, and was totally unconcerned about the fact that Peter needed us to bring him some warm clothes. Which, by the way, Tony has the ability to get him decent clothes, or rich people clothes in general, because the coat he was wearing for himself was at least \$500 I'm pretty sure, so fuck this guy majorly for dropping Peter in Gotham without the needed supplies for anything. And then he- ugh! I just. I dunno. He got under my skin when he made Peter thank me for the box. Not that that itself is wrong, but the way he said it! It was like he was trying to piss me off!"*

Bruce watches as both of his boys mimic the anger that Duke is displaying, and what Bruce himself is feeling as well. He hadn't liked the idea of Tony from the moment they heard about him, and it only grew the more his kids reported about how alone Peter truly was. Now that Tony is confirmed to actually exist, and Duke is this worked up about it...

"They were working on something together, I think. I didn't get a good look at it, because Tony blocked my view of the whiteboard. But it was some pretty complicated math. Didn't you say Tony is an engineer?"

"Yeah, Peter said he's a brilliant engineer, but that he didn't know much about his work. Guess that isn't true too, but I already thought that." Tim replies, a set to his jaw and one finger tapping on the table with irritation. "What were you saying about someone is a god?"

"Dude." Duke gets serious, voice dropping low. *"Tony is."*

"...Excuse me?"

"I saw it. You know, light gets all... bendy, around certain people- like the demigods! Like Wonder Woman, she shines, you know? But when I looked at Tony, it was just like when I'm looking at a straight up God. Or something fucked up, man. I think Tony is- well I don't know what he is, but he's a deadbeat one, whatever it is."

“Is- Is Peter a demigod? How could we have missed that?”

“Not that I can tell! Ah, shit, I gotta go. Mugging.” Duke hangs up, and Tim sets his phone down on the table with an exhausted sigh.

Every time that Bruce thinks that he starts understanding the situation with Peter, something else gets thrown into the mix.

“Oh god,” Tim’s eyes widen. “B, you don’t think Dick had a kid with a God, right?”

“No, Tim. I don’t think that happened.”

“What if he grew super fast?” Tim hasn’t really heard him. He bites his nails, casting his gaze out the window. “That explains the weird age gap, because Dick wouldn’t have had a kid when he was 15. How do I ask my brother if he banged someone recently?”

“Shut the fuck up.” The words tumble out of Damian in pure horror. Bruce had only seen this reaction from him when he watched *Milo and Otis* for the first time. “*Never* speak again. In fact, if you even try, I’m going to rip out your tongue and staple it to a door to warn off curses.”

“Damian, don’t threaten your brother with ripping out his tongue. I can’t believe this has to be said.” The brunt of this entire conversation is hanging over his head like a guillotine.

“Tim, I have to agree with Damian on this one. You don’t have to ask him anything, nor say the word ‘bang’ in that context for the rest of your life.”

“But it could be the case! Oh, god, please say it happened before Wally,” Tim adds on to the growing horror. “I can handle a few murderers in the family but we need to draw the line somewhere.”

“You can-” Bruce feels a wave of calm wash over him. Like a blessing, that calm carries away the pain. With that, Bruce stands up from the table, back to wondering about the *real* problem: How the *hell* he’s going to investigate this when the kid is setting up to get payback on him. “Can you call Dick? I’m going to go start looking through the files we have on known gods. We’re swinging by to talk to Peter during patrol tonight.”

“B, it’s *Halloween*.” Tim stands up from his seat.

He doesn’t protest like any other kid would- Halloween isn’t a time for trick or treating, not for vigilantes or civilians in Gotham’s case. The holiday manages to bring out the worst from anyone wanting to stake a claim on Gotham or trying to put on a show. Firefly is still out there, too, and because he hadn’t done anything so far, they assumed tonight would be when Firefly strikes.

“I haven’t forgotten.” Bruce promises. “We’re all going to be out tonight. Steph is going to be running comms with Babs, so we’ll have eyes everywhere.”

“You think Tony’s gonna run off if we don’t catch up to him.” Tim hits the nail on the head.

“We can’t miss the chance to ask him questions and get clarity on the situation with Ohnn. Let’s just hope that seeing Tony didn’t make Peter close off again.”

-

Peter’s pulled pranks before.

Granted, the fun-loving ones had been back when Aunt May and Uncle Ben were alive. He used to like Halloween because it was a time for tricks, and he could dress up in costumes that he and May made together. He liked hand making the costumes, learning how to sew on all the details to the fabrics and wishing he could wear them other places when the holiday was all done.

The fun pranks with May and Ben had been things like hiding smiley face stickers around the house or putting slinkies in the cup cabinet. He had gotten that from Ben, he thinks. Ben liked to pull little tricks all the time. When Peter was around 7 years old, Ben had told him that he had to eat the Starbursts with the paper on, and so he *did*. To which Ben laughed for hours, and then days, and then months, and *years*, remembering Peter chewing on a wrapped Starburst and making a sour face.

Those are all fine and were in good fun. Peter hadn’t known that he had a severe petty streak in him until he started getting bullied at school.

Tying people’s shoelaces together when they weren’t looking because they pushed him down in the hallway, shredding their geometry homework when they tried to steal his asthma inhaler, and one time, he tricked some seventh grader into locking himself in a bathroom stall that was overflowing and making him wait for the janitor, which was 100% deserved because he tried to stick Peter’s head in that toilet.

But he wanted *this* prank to be good, he wanted something that would show that Peter isn’t gonna be hard to mess with. The problem is... Peter has limited resources.

He’s not gonna spend a bunch of money pulling this prank, so Peter really had to get creative with what he has on hand. As he sticks on the windowed wall of the tallest building in Upper West Side, he awaits with bated breath for this Halloween to get to a proper start.

Gotham is unusually quiet today. It’s like everyone has locked their doors and boarded up their windows, awaiting a storm readying it’s way to blow past them all. He’s seen very little cars on the streets, and whereas in New York, every bar would be covered in drunk college students wearing the ugly version of their favorite childhood characters, Gotham’s University District was covered in a thick layer of silence when Peter made his way over here.

Peter rubs his hands together, the wind breezing past. It makes him thankful that he decided to do something with that jacket after all.

His suit doesn’t have thermoregulation, not yet. He wanted to add that to his next one- he thought he’d be making a new one soon, actually, and if this hadn’t happened, he might already *have* it- but things didn’t work out that way, obviously. That means that the farther

into fall that they were getting, the more that Peter would be suffering. He had to risk some of his flexibility in order to wear a jacket.

He added a lot of detail to it, though. He wasn't kidding that he used to sew when he was a kid, and he's only gotten infinitely better at it after the spider-bite. He had gone back to the Gotham Academy after hours to get some new webbing, and since that meant he had extra, Peter used his webbing to make more patches.

On the left sleeve is Red Hood's patch- Peter thinks it's some kind of symbol that he gives to people in Crime Alley? He'll have to ask more about that later. Underneath that, Peter had added a blue X patch. On the left sleeve is a black and white patch that looks like the eyes of his mask, a black spider on a red background, and an Iron Man patch. Both sleeves have white webbing now stitched in that mimics the webbing patterns on the forearms of his suit underneath. And on the back of his jacket is his spider-symbol, bold and proud.

It's warm, it looks cool, and it's entirely on brand for Spidey. A little risky because it can identify him easy if someone else finds it, but Peter's not planning to wear it out unless he's in his suit anyway.

Besides- the pockets are holding the rest of what he needs for his prank on Batman. He had already stashed his backpack back at Benny's after pulling off the first part of his plan. Now, Peter lies in wait.

He knows one of them is going to come by any second now...

THERE! hello hi friend! fast!!

Peter stands up in a flash. He was right! Just the Robin that he was looking for has swung by, right on time. Peter runs after him, thwipping a web to a building across the street and jumping off the side of the building.

Robin's cape flits by, barely noticeable among the black and yellow of Gotham. Peter is sure that Damian designed the Robin look this way on purpose, because he's heard from Gothamites that the first Robin was all about flashy colors. If it wasn't for Peter's spider-sense tugging him in Damian's direction, nor the fact that Peter's webbing makes it easier for him to swing around, Peter wouldn't have noticed Damian in the first place. Damian lands almost silently on a rooftop of one building, casted in the shadows. He watches as Damian walks underneath some metal grating for a platform up to a billboard.

There's no Batman in sight, which is how Peter wanted this to go. He wants to prank Batman, not Robin. Unless, of course, Robin wants to stand in his way. Or the others. Not only would this stand as a warning for what Peter's about to do, it also is a chance for Peter to see if Damian made the connection between him and Spider-Man.

Peter swings himself to land upside down on the platform. The lights from the city don't reach this far back, and his eyes adjust to the darkness quickly. He tilts his head as he spots Damian standing at the end of the walkway, crowded between the metal of the billboard on one side and the stone wall of the building next to this one. He's crouched down next to a funny looking gargoyle, ready to pounce as he observes the streets below.

He stalks silently behind Damian, stopping just behind him, eyes catching on the katana at Damian's hip. That's... something.

"Trick or treat!"

!!!!!!!

Damian reacts instantly. He's pulled the katana out lighting quick and turned, one foot on the ledge and the other providing more stable footing on the rooftop. Peter hears the uptick of his heartbeat as the sword almost catches Peter's nose. It was so quick that Peter's spider-sense couldn't tell him much besides that danger was coming.

"This is *not* a treat." Peter frowns, pushing the sword away from his face.

The sword lowers to show Damian glowering at him, nose scrunched up in distaste. Oh, yeah, that's *definitely* Damian in that cape, alright. The mask can't seem to hide the crippling, constant disappointment that Damian carries for everyone. He scoffs, sheathing the sword at his side as he glances up at Peter's feet on the grating. "What freak house did you come from?"

"Does Robin not carry candy for the poor souls of Gotham in all of those pouches of yours?" Peter ignores him and unsticks, landing right-side-up on the rooftop. He puts his hands in his jacket pockets. "Actually, I don't see *any* trick or treaters. This city is capital S 'Sad', dude. I haven't seen one pretty-robot-warrior-princess-power-ranger or cowboys or dragons, all in search of candy and fun."

"This is Gotham. Any candy that is passed out would have razor blades in it."

"You know what? I've heard about that too." Peter sighs. "You gotta be next level demented to mess with somebody's Snickers bar, man."

"What are you doing here, Spiderman?"

"I'm here to- Hold on." Peter hesitates, squinting his eyes at Robin. "Ask me that again."

"...What. Are. You. Doing. Here?" Damian lowers his voice and drags out, annoyed at having to repeat himself.

"No, say Spider-Man."

"...Spiderman."

"That's what I thought." Peter shakes his head. "No, I can't have that. *Spider-Man*. It has a hyphen, you're not saying it right."

Damian's mouth drops, and all that comes out is, "Are you being facetious with me?"

"I'm being so serious right now."

“What do you want?” Damian jabs a finger into his chest, the whites of his domino mask narrowing when he furrows his brows. “I’m not repeating myself again.”

“What, can’t I visit my favorite Robin?” Peter asks. Damian doesn’t believe him for a second. “Okay, geez, touchy. Maybe I came to catch up with you, how about that? You don’t want to talk to me? I thought you’d have a lot to say.”

“Tt. I have *plenty* to say. Like how stupid you were to back-talk one of our most unpredictable rogues, for instance. You were practically flaunting your identity around for everyone to see.” Damian sounds like he’s scolding Peter, which is so not cool because Damian is literally Peter’s age, and trying to sound like he’s older.

“Not flaunting.” Peter protests, coming to stand side by side with Damian on the ledge. “At least, not for *everyone*. Just wanted to make it fun, see if you guys would figure it out.”

“You think we’re idiots? We’d have to be blind not to be able to tell. No, even a blind person could hear your bad decisions a mile away.”

“How many of you know?” Peter had assumed that they would all know, by know.

“All of us.” Damian smirks. “Did you plan for that?”

“I didn’t really plan anything, to be honest. The train thing happened on the spot. I do my best work under severe amounts of pressure. Just ask my AP teachers.” Peter puts one hand behind his head, looking out at the city below. This is a pretty cool spot- it shows an overview of the park in the Diamond District across the street, Wayne Industries down the road, and a local bar that is, once again, suspiciously empty for a holiday. “I didn’t really start planning *anything* out until recently. Someone told me that my ‘go-with-the-flow’ way of handling things was gonna get me killed.”

“There is something seriously wrong with you.” Damian states flatly, and Peter laughs. “It’s not funny, Gra- *Spider-Man*. Two-Face is a formidable opponent.”

“And he was beaten by a 14 year old with a Batman pen.” Peter shrugs. “Crazy how things work out, right?”

“The others are worried about you.” Damian points out, and Peter winces. Right, that doesn’t stop just because they know his identity now. “About what you did.”

“Were you?” Peter questions, and Damian’s lips press into a line. Caught. “You stopped him from cutting in. You knew I was doing something, and you could have interfered. But you didn’t.”

“I wanted to know what you were doing. I figured you out, and I wanted to know if you were stupid enough to get yourself killed.” Damian adamantly defending himself, and Peter raises his hands in surrender. “Which: you are.”

“Don’t bite my head off, dude.” Peter can’t help but laugh again, to which Damian scoffs at. “Whatever your reason was, I wanted to *thank* you. It worked out just like I hoped. Even

though I'm sure it's probably 'cause you thought I was cool, but whatever. I'll let you have that one."

"Don't put words into my mouth." Damian punches his shoulder.

"Uh huh, sure, sure." Peter smirks, and even though there's a mask on his face, Damian must hear it, because he shakes his head in frustration. "But, say, I was wondering something... Your dad kind of double dog dared me."

"Father has *never* uttered those words in his life--"

"--and I ain't a chicken, so I'm wondering if your help with my plans stopped after the train."

Damian goes silent, turning his head away from the street to look at Peter. Instantly, Peter feels his spider sense twitch: *curious*? He can't help but grin again- He had a suspicion that Damian would be down for this kind of thing.

"...What do you have in mind?"

"I had a friend of mine say that I need to know my opponent. What's something that Batman wouldn't expect me to get without him noticing?"

Damian's mouth lifts into a wicked, eager grin. "I'm listening, Spider-Man."

Peter pulls out his comm from his pocket- the Stark Tech, not any Batman one. He pulls up his mask briefly to put it in his ear, stepping off of the ledge and sticking his feet to the side of the building. He looks up at Damian. "How about I tell you on our own frequency while we swing around? You can catch me up."

-

"Oh, *you're* here. To what do I owe the displeasure?"

"Nightwing." Bruce greets him nicely, because the ass refuses to rise to taunts like that. He comes to a stop next to Dick as he sits on the rooftop.

He'd just come to a stop and decided to take a break. The city is quiet tonight, and it doesn't bode well for them. Halloween is as it always is: every Gothamite awaiting with bated breath, staying inside, and praying to whatever God they believe in that it won't be their home that gets caught up in the shit storm that is brewing overhead.

It's times like these that Dick wonders if Gothamites naturally adapted to the curse that hangs over Gotham. Even without being directly told, people just seem to know when something is brewing. Half of the hostages in the Two-Face incident a few days ago told police in their interviews that they thought about taking a different train, but they wanted to get home early.

That could be a hindsight effect, however. What was more interesting was that everyone on 'Team B' told the police not a word about Peter besides that the kid hit the lever to the window. Now *that* is something Dick wants to study, or talk about. Not whatever Bruce wants to.

And he has a good idea what it is.

“Sorry, there’s not any young orphans around here for you to let endanger themselves.”

Dick has been avoiding Bruce since that night. It’s likely unfair, because what *else* was Bruce expected to do if Peter was held at gunpoint and he had to deal with Two-Face?

Oh, *right!* There was Nightwing and Robin *right there. In the same car.*

Ugh, again, unfair. Bruce wanted Dick to trust him with Peter and the situation at hand, without backup, so they could get the other hostages out and then maybe have Dick find another way to get involved. Dick could get all of that just from Batman telling him to ‘Go, now.’

(Hadn’t Bruce said that before? A part of Dick still isn’t over that period of his life where he thought Bruce didn’t want him around anymore, where Dick avoided him like he’s doing now, thinking he had Bruce thinking ‘Go, now.’ that same exact way).

Dick hadn’t done what Bruce wanted. He got the hostages back to the station safe so they could evacuate, but he had sent Damian back to Jason’s (Why? Was it because Dick felt the need to keep Damian away from Bruce, sometimes? Despite the fact that Bruce is Damian’s father?) and he himself had stuck around to stop Bruce. Because he knows Batman, and Bruce, and he knew that something was going to come up.

And it did. Because Dick is always right.

Bruce has no response to Dick’s mean spirited jab. Jason’s death is still a bitter and raw experience that they can’t relive *again*. Stephanie’s death that had ripped Tim apart, too, and- Yeah. No. Not now. Revisit that another time, and focus only on the fact that Bruce didn’t even talk to them before deciding on something with Peter.

“I know I butted in.” Bruce sighs, and he brings himself down to Dick’s level. They sit shoulder to shoulder, looking out at the city. “I hadn’t meant it that way.”

“You never mean it that way.” Dick retorts. “You do it, and then you realize you fucked up, or you don’t. Either way, it’s the same result every time.”

“I’m sorry.” Bruce says. And his voice is so gentle that it startles Dick.

He looks up at Bruce and doesn’t see the defensive man he used to be. Bruce is... *open*. He’s not trying to cover himself in multiple layers of walls, with locked gates that no one can get through, no matter how hard Dick tries.

“I should have at least let you know what I was planning. I’ve never been the best at that. Or good at it at all.”

“Tell me about it.” Dick snarks weakly. He’s more confused than he’s ever been in his life. A genuine apology from Independent and Emotionally Constipated?

“I don’t think Peter would have come back with us despite telling us his identity. And I think that’s mostly because of me.” Bruce admits. “He doesn’t know me like he knows the rest of you. He’s talked with you all inside and outside of the suits. He’s only met me once, as Batman, and it’s not a secret that he doesn’t trust adults, specifically. I...”

“...You what?”

Bruce looks at him. Another time to hate that stupid cowl on Bruce’s face, the fact that Batman is always covering up his body language, even in times like this. But it’s his *voice* that strikes Dick as being nothing like Batman, and everything like Bruce.

“I think that if he and I come to an understanding, where he knows that we stand on equal ground, he’ll be more open to the idea.”

It’s... not a difficult concept to grasp. It makes sense- because Bruce always has to make everything make *sense*. Peter doesn’t trust adults, and the one time he spoke to Batman before the train, it had been a short conversation. If Peter somehow finds an even footing with Batman- with *Bruce*- it would help. Though Dick doesn’t know how sneaking up on Peter is the way to do that.

Tim said that Bruce had freaked him out after grabbing his neck. It didn’t have anything to do with that scar, did it?

...It might. There’s a good chance that it did. He’s aware that there’s an ability that Peter might have, something to do with vibrations in the air. He had done some research on spiders in the time since finding out about Peter. He still has yet to see just what level that ability is at, but it could explain why the kid is so good at sensing when people are nearby him.

But that scar is at the back of Peter’s neck, and he had been so adamant about Dick not asking about it. The way the scar looked- and Dick has seen a lot of scars in his lifetime- it came from something sharp, maybe jagged.

Bruce doesn’t know that. He probably saw the scar, but then again, the hood that Peter wears and the bulk of the new jacket made it hard to spot.

“It’s killing you that the kid knows our identities and he’s not home, isn’t it?” Dick doesn’t even *have* to phrase it as a question. He knows that that is the case.

“There’s a few reasons why I want him home.” Bruce replies. But then adds: “That could be one of them, yes.”

“He’s smart, isn’t he?” Dick smiles. Peter *is* clever, wickedly so. A troublemaker, for sure, but Dick has never not known someone that fits right into their family that doesn’t cause a heap load of trouble. “How much did you hear?”

“Didn’t he call Two-Face an old shitbag?”

“He *did*.” Dick laughs, brushing some hair out of his face. “Now that I’m not panicking that he’s in imminent danger, that’s actually hilarious.”

“He’s got a strange sense of humor. Like you do.” Bruce bumps his shoulder into Dick’s.

“My sense of humor is amazing, thank you. I’ve spent years crafting it into perfection.”

“If I laid out all of the jokes I’ve heard in my life, from you specifically, onto a table, 90% of those jokes would be puns. Terrible puns, at that.”

Dick bumps his shoulder back. “I save them up for Cobblepott the most. He hates all of my sea-related puns, ‘cause I make them bad *on purpose*.”

“You should be fined for that.”

“I’d make you pay it.” Dick replies easily.

“And that would be what finally makes me go bankrupt.” Bruce jokes, a hint of a smile on his face.

Dick is about to reply with a clever little hit about how Bruce could buy planet Earth and not go bankrupt, when boots land on the roof behind them. They both tense up, but when they spot Damian, they relax again.

“Hey Baby Bat.” Dick revels in the way Damian’s nose scrunches with distaste. Putting ‘Baby’ to any nickname annoys him every time. Damian strides over to them with a grunt as a greeting. Dick scoots over so he can plop himself down between the two of them, legs over the side of the ledge.

“Nothing on this side?” He asks, ignoring Dick’s wonderful greeting.

“No, nothing yet.” Bruce replies. “Firefly would target a more densely populated area, though, so that’s expected. Black Bat and Red Robin are patrolling through Chinatown right now. I told them we’d meeting them in Old Gotham.”

“There’s not a lot to target besides neighborhoods this year.” Damian says. “No parties, no gatherings, no trick-or-treating. If no one is going to come out, then Firefly is going to go to them instead.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. But with this Firefly, there’s no way to tell where he’s going to strike until he does.” Dick sighs. He hates the Fireflies- there’s been multiple over the years. They’re arsonists with a penchant for tech. They bomb and destroy whatever they can get their hands on. “At least with the other versions, we could gather where they’re going to set up their first strike. This one does it randomly, so long as it strikes a lot of people.”

“Have either of you heard from Oracle yet?” Bruce asks. Dick and Damian both shake their head. She’s probably still talking to Red Robin and Black Bat, since their neighborhoods tonight are more populated, and therefore, more likely to be targeted.

Firefly causes more destruction and deaths in one blow than most of their rogues do. The others build up over time, make plans and cause problems that way. But Firefly doesn’t care what they hit. They collect their equipment and place their bombs, and that’s when they’re ready to go.

Wanting an update from Oracle, Dick raises his hand to his comm. That's when a blur of red and black swings past them, a loud *smack!* and a whoop that cutting through the air. Bruce is pushed forward but catches himself on the ledge before he can tumble down. Spider-Man lands on the building opposite of theirs, a lively laugh echoing down the street.

Dick smiles- first at the sight of Spider-Man, of *Peter*, doing alright and causing trouble. Then, because he recognizes the jacket that Peter has on. It's the same one that he can Tim had pulled out of Jason's stash of jackets and patches, that he keeps around to give to kids in Crime Alley. It's a symbol of protection, a warning to everyone that Red Hood would get revenge for them. Peter put more patches on his jacket, but Dick can't see them clearly from this far away.

What he *can* see is that it's Spider-Man's jacket. Because when Peter turns around to point at the back of his shoulder, it looks like he's just showing off the big Spider-Man logo on the back. But then he calls out, "Look what I left for you!"

Bruce brings a hand to his shoulder and pulls off a bright red sticky note. In big block letters, Peter had written down:

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN, BATMAN!

-Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man

Dick laughs- startled, firstly, but when he reads the note he just can't help it. Across the street, Peter yells out, "Tag! You're it!"

Dick doubles over himself, not bothering to hide his amusement. He slaps one hand on his knee, nudging Damian to find that the boy has a delightedly wicked smirk on his face as well. Peter takes off into the night and Bruce is already on his feet. Bruce has the *nerve* to have a gobsmacked look on his face, as if he can't believe what he just got into.

"Well? Go get him, B!" Dick hollers, clutching his stomach. "This part of your master plan to get him home? Huh?"

"I already told him you wouldn't lose, Father." Damian stands up as well, readying his grappling hook. "The clock is ticking. I said you'd catch him in fifteen."

"This can't be the only trick he has up his sleeve." Bruce grunts, tucking the sticky note into his utility belt and taking off. Damian isn't far behind him, but Dick needs a second to catch his breath.

Holy shit, Dick loves this kid! He hadn't known that Peter would actually rise to the challenge, but maybe he *should* have expected that. After seeing Peter so skittish this past month, it's nice to see that he's got a wicked sense of humor.

Dick presses his comm and tightens his grip on his grappling hook, swinging to catch up with the trio. Before Babs can say anything, Dick breathes out, "You'll *never* guess what just happened, O!"

“You sound delighted. Did you win the lottery? Are you giving me a million dollars?”

“I’d give you the world.” Dick lands on a roof and runs along behind them. He sees the swoop of Batman’s cape in the night sky, falling downwards towards the top of an apartment building. Robin is not long after him. But the fact that he can’t even see Spider-Man yet? He’s hit with another bout of pride so strong it’s like it’s gonna knock him over. “But no. Spider-Man and Batman are playing tag!”

“P-Spider-Man is out?” Babs laughs incredulously. *“Oh, I gotta tell the others immediately.”*

Dick only manages to catch up to Robin when they get closer to the Gotham Natural History Museum. Robin stands on the taller building next to it, observing the duo below. He glances towards Dick when he lands next to him, Dick stepping all the way to the edge to get the best view as he can. He doesn’t want to miss a thing.

Batman and Spider-Man are down there, alright. Batman is trying to tag Spider-Man in a back and forth game that looks suspiciously like Ninja. Bruce goes to tag Peter’s arm, but Peter spins out of the way and slaps another sticky note to Bruce’s back. He ducks underneath Bruce’s arm and turns to face Bruce’s back, bouncing on his toes and getting more space between them.

“Come on, Batman, I know you’re old, but are you slow, too?” Peter teases lightly. Dick crouches down, a wide grin on his face- delighted to see that Bruce is grinning too.

Peter hops over Bruce when the man ducks down to tag his arm. A sticky note is slapped onto the back of the cowl, and from here, the drawing looks like it might be a very poorly drawn Batman symbol. Peter falls into a roll, bouncing up lightning quick onto his feet again. Bruce almost gets him, however, by swinging his leg out to swoop under his feet. Peter jumps to avoid it, and narrowly misses when Bruce almost tags his shoulder.

“Okay, not slow or geriatric- yet.” Peter admits, falling flat on his back on purpose to avoid Batman. He kicks up at Bruce’s chest, forcing him to dodge, and flips over himself into a runners start. “Do you like the sticky notes?”

“They’re on brand for you. Oracle likes your drawings of dogs, by the way.” Bruce comments, far too amused.

“Oracle has great taste.” Peter isn’t just fast, it’s his reflexes that are the most impressive. He catches himself and makes up for his mistakes so quickly that it’s hard to tell there was one.

“What’s the plan then, Spider-Man? We aren’t just playing tag here, are we?”

“What, are you too good for tag?” Peter runs along the skylight, flipping to get out of Bruce’s way. “You gotta get in touch with your inner child, dude. Otherwise you’re gonna be old *and* sad.”

“Wise advice from a preschooler.” Bruce says. Dick and Damian both hold their breath when Bruce *barely* grazes Peter’s shoulder. Dick calls out that it’s not a tag at the same time that

Damian does, but their input was unneeded because neither Peter or Bruce hesitate to continue the game. “But you’re dodging the question.”

“And dodging you. I’m doing good at both of those, aren’t I?” Peter sounds oh-so-proud of himself.

“Robin,” Dick nudges Damian, who waves him off, eyes on the scene below. Dick nudges him again, unrelenting. “Robiiiiin! Tell me what the game plan is!”

“How do you know if I know?”

“You made a bet, which means you talked about it.” Dick points out, and Damian scoffs. He thinks on it for a couple heartbeats, his grin widening slowly. “Oh, you *so* know. Tell me? Tell me tell me tell meeee-”

“Just watch!” Damian insists. “I know he’s good, but there’s no way he’s *that* good.”

“Good at what?” Dick complains. He wants to be in on the joke too. Is it because he’s *old* now? Is he too old to be in on the jokes?

But he relents, finally, focusing entirely on the game. Dick recalls when *he* and Bruce played tag a million years ago, it wasn’t as easy for him as it is for Peter. It took him years to get used to Gotham the same way that Jason or Tim were used to Gotham. And Bruce is no slouch either, he never goes *easy* on them. Sure, he’ll let them win sometimes, but he doesn’t make it a quick game.

They had almost the exact same scenario near here, before. Though, it had been interrupted by Catwoman and a heist that they definitely didn’t just *happen* to stumble upon. (That’s a secret that will go down to their graves, together. Catwoman still thinks that they had figured her out.)

Every time Bruce gets close, Peter is just out of reach all over again. Except, for a game of tag, it’s a little stationary all of a sudden, isn’t it? They had gone from swinging through the streets and parkouring over the buildings to sticking to one spot... Dick squints down at the two of them.

What is Peter planning?

It’s gotta be good, if Damian decided he wanted in. He used to say that pranks are beneath them, but Dick thinks he’s finally gotten Damian into the brotherly spirit. He’s getting pretty good at being a backup when Dick wants to prank Jay. But Dick has to make sure they’re ‘worthy’ or he doesn’t. So what would intrigue Damian enough to play along?

Peter jumps over Bruce again. Only, this time, there’s not a sticky note with a clever quip or drawing on it. Bruce reaches up to his shoulder and spins around at the loss of weight. Dick jumps to his feet, a shocked laugh escaping him.

“Yes! Good *job*, Spider-Man!”

“Hey, hey look!” Peter runs with Batman’s cape in his hand. The dark fabric swaths over him like a huge flag.

He runs up the wall to bring himself up to the ledge Dick and Damian are on, coming to a stop next to Robin with the Batman cape around his shoulders. It’s just in time for the moon to peek out from behind Gotham’s clouds, a rare occurrence, and the cape casts a huge shadow down below on the skylight.

He lowers his voice down to his best Batman impression. “...I’m Batman.”

Dick *howls* with laughter. Bruce looks up at them- it’s insane to see Batman without his cape, and it makes the fact that Peter stole it that much more hilarious. Bruce is shaking his head, but he has an amused grin. Peter puffs up to stand taller when Dick claps him on the shoulder. He can’t see underneath Peter’s mask, but he has no doubt the kid is grinning ear to ear, proud of himself.

And he *should* be! Dick hasn’t seen anyone steal Batman’s cape from him before- at least, not on *purpose*. Not only is it impossible to get that close to Batman for that long to get it, it’s also a feat itself to know that the cape detaches in case of an emergency. Whether that means it can get caught on something, or grabbed (by anyone strong enough to lift that kevlar and hold onto it), or sucked up by something, the cape *can* come off, Bruce is too paranoid for it to not do so. But not a lot of people know that-

Ah, that must be Damian’s doing. Damian leans forward to look at Bruce better, voice full of disbelief. “Father, I have to admit, I didn’t think he could do it.”

“You totally thought I could! Why wouldn’t I?” Peter boasts, bouncing on his toes with excitement. “You two should have seen him when we were talking about it. He was saying, ‘Spider-Man, you’re so talented and so cool-’”

“Stop making up lies, brat!” Damian kicks at Peter’s knee.

“It’s true! Not clickbait!”

“You need to be knocked down a peg.”

“Wow, Robin,” Peter shakes his head. “How could you talk to Batman like that? Have you learned nothing, son?”

“You’re going to give me an aneurysm.” Damian complains.

“You can’t have an aneurysm until you give me the money you now owe me.” Peter hums.

“That was seriously impressive, Spider-Man.” Dick beams down at him. Peter stands taller at the compliment. “I mean, I know *someone* stole the tires off the Batmobile, but I didn’t think his cape would be next.”

“Good job, Spider-Man.” Bruce crosses his arms, sounding genuinely impressed.

Peter mimics his pose, says something back to Bruce that Dick can't hear. He's too busy seeing the easy banter between them all, noticing how Peter is so comfortable, suddenly. Because Bruce had been right.

He hates when Bruce is right. It's a bittersweet moment, watching Peter hop down from the ledge to return Bruce's cape to him. Bruce takes it back and clips it on, and Peter doesn't flinch when Bruce reaches to pat his head. It's like Peter belongs, like he's always been around. It's exactly what Dick wanted, in a way.

This is the exact moment Dick *knows*. He's going to have to fight Bruce for custody.

Okay, probably a dramatic way to put that. What he means? Like *hell* is he going to let Bruce adopt Peter, not under his watch.

See, with Damian, there's not much that Dick can *do* there. As close as he and Dami had gotten in the time that Bruce was missing- no, presumed *dead*-, Dami *is* still his little brother. He's *Bruce's* son, and they actually are managing to build that relationship now. It's hard to say if any of them will ever feel the normal dynamic between a father and two sons, or if Damian might always feel like Dick is his father, and Bruce is someone who should be.

That's okay. Dick doesn't need that relationship to be defined for it to be alright. All he can hope the best for is that they feel loved. They take that one day at a time, with Dick just being there for Dami any way that he can be.

But Peter?

He's up for grabs, in lack of a better term. Fuck Tony, that bastard (Didn't Tim say he wanted to tell Dick something about that?) has no rights to Peter anymore. And Dick will be *damned* if Bruce even gets to look in Peter's direction before he can snatch him up. Bruce has plenty of kids, and Peter- Well, Dick doesn't know for sure, yet. Peter might not even *want* him to be his dad, or something like it. But they can try, right? He wonders if this is what Bruce was feeling like, maybe, when he took Dick home, all those years ago? Like the world should belong to this kid? That no one should ever be able to hurt him again?

He already knows by now that the reason he can't ever get any sleep is because he's worried about Peter. It drives him crazy, wondering if he's going to wake up to bad news, because Peter's not just down the hall like Damian is.

He'll have to get a new apartment, for sure. This time, he'll make sure it has 3 bedrooms- one for him, one for Dami, and one for Peter. Maybe for Bludhaven, or maybe for *Gotham*. He honestly never considered moving back, even if he does stay in the Manor when he's in Gotham. But Damian goes to school at Gotham Academy, and Peter could go too, so neither are alone. They already get along so well, this is the easiest that Damian has ever made a friend, so Dick shouldn't split them up.

Dick could even sacrifice the car he purchased all on his own and has had since he was 18, and finally make a payment on a more reliable car. He'll have to get new furniture too, because he's basically had the same decorations (with a few new couches in some of those years) since he first moved to Bludhaven, and with a new apartment comes a new style.

Or, maybe not even an apartment, but a *house*? Something in Dick's soul used to feel unsettled by the thought of setting down roots in one spot. He'd gone from traveling the world to being set down in Gotham, in the Manor, of all places. He never really enjoyed the feeling, and moving to an apartment had abated both the urge to flee, to fly, but not straying too far from Bruce... in some kind of hope that Bruce would call and ask him to come back, and Dick could be right there.

But a house, now, doesn't sound like a trap. It sounds like a place for Damian and Peter to play with Haley, his dog, while Dick learns from Jay how to cook something that isn't an abomination. Sounds like a fridge with a bunch of school assignments, report cards, and drawings all over it with stupid magnets.

Dick could be that. He could be a guy with a house, with his kids and his dog and his magnets. He could be there for Peter.

"Did Edna Mode teach you nothing?" Peter is scolding Bruce when Dick snaps himself back into reality.

"Who is that?"

"Who-" Peter gawks at him. "Who is *Edna Mode*?"

"Is that a niche celebrity?"

"It's-" Peter cuts himself off from his rant before it can even get started. His head sharply turns to the horizon line, going completely still. After a few seconds of silence, he tilts his head as though listening for something far away.

"Something wrong?" Damian chimes up.

Peter doesn't reply. He stares out at the space of the city, taking a few steps forward towards the edge of the skylight.

"Helloooo? Earth to Spider-Boy." Damian tries again.

"...Something just happened." Peter says, all humor washed away.

Damian drops down to the skylight, trying to see what Peter sees on the horizon. "You smell smoke?"

BOOM!

-

A billow of smoke plumes up from a street a few neighborhoods down. Not a one of them have to say anything to each other, they just leap off the side of the building and towards the commotion. Spider-Man swings faster, not having to worry about a grappling hook in order to get by.

!!!! close !!!!

Spider-Man grits his teeth as they get nearer to the explosion. He can smell the acrid smoke from here, can practically taste it. Horrifyingly, Spider-Man doesn't hear any screams, not until a full minute after the bomb goes off. That's when he hears them: a chorus of people crying out. They're unintelligible at first, but when Spider-Man finally arrives on scene, he can make out distinct voices.

Someone calls out *Baba!* in the rubble of what used to be a tall apartment building. Set up in Old Gotham, the buildings around it reach at least twenty stories, maybe thirty for some of them. There's a hotel at the end of the street, and the road is crowded with cars. The building had fallen over into the street, and there are cars buried underneath the rubble as well. Everyone who was in the cars that weren't collapsed on are running out of their cars, carrying children or their parents.

help! right there! get!

Spider-Man swings down to the rubble in the street. ~~(There's a dropped Winnie the Pooh doll. Who did that belong to?)~~ He starts by trying to get through the concrete and stone, but there's enough there that he can't just walk through it. He has to push the stone away, his ears perked for any noise that he or the rubble isn't making.

The first huge stone lifts off of one car. The passenger side is caved in, the metal crunched nearly flat on the seat. Spider-Man hears the choked cough of someone inside, and he pushes more rubble to see clearer to the driver's side. An old man is trying to get his seat belt undone.

"Hold on, sir, I've got you!" Spider-Man pulls the jammed door open.

The old man is blinking dust and smoke out of his eyes, tears streaming down his face. Spider-Man touches his neck, feeling for a pulse. Steady, and Spider-Man doesn't smell blood here. He grabs Spider-Man's wrist, his voice barely there. "What happened?"

"There's was an explosion. But I'm gonna get you out, okay?" Spider-Man reaches over and yanks the seat belt out of the buckle. He gently pulls the old man out of the car. "Put your shirt over your mouth- Yeah, like that."

The old man gets the gist- no one should be breathing this in.

This isn't anything like Two-Face. At least then, Peter had a decent shot of getting the detonator away from him. The bombs were active, but it was a confined enough space with enough heroes and the right amount of people there that things were more controlled, despite the situation looking nothing like it.

But right now? Right now, Spider-Man can't see the bombs, but he can tell there are more, and that they are close. And they're *big*, they make every hair of his stand on end. There are far more people around, and a lot more injured.

Spider-Man needs to get as many people evacuated as he can, first. He can hear the sound of a drone nearby-

there!

Above them, he spots the infamous Firefly speed past on a high powered drone. Batman and Robin tail after him, just as quick. He's holding grenades in his hand- No, Spider-Man is more useful here. Batman and Robin know what they're doing.

"Stay right here, duck down low." Spider-Man tells him. The old man coughs into his shirt, doing as instructed. Spider-Man goes in search of more people in the cars that were trapped.

A woman with braids and a cut on her forehead, a guy with a broken nose that's pulling a girl with an ID on her dress for Wayne Industries out of their car, a boy with-

gone.

"Momma?"

Oh god.

"Hey, buddy." Spider-Man pops open the car door crouches next to him. The little boy can't be more than six years old. He's trying to get out of his booster seat, but the clip is too strong for him. From the backseat, all the kid can see is his mother in the driver's seat, her head at an odd angle.

The boy's eyes don't move from his mom. Not until Spider-Man touches his arm and undoes the car seat. "Hey, kiddo. I'm Spider-Man. What's your name?"

"Demetrius." The boy's voice cracks despite how softly he spoke, and when he looks at Spider-Man, it feels like his heart has been ripped out of his chest.

"Alright, Demetrius. I'm gonna get you out, okay?"

"What about Momma?"

"Momma wants you to get out first, buddy." Spider-Man lifts him up. He turns his body away from the car so Demetrius can't see, but the boy cranes his head to try looking for his mother anyway. "It's gonna be alright. There are some nice people that are gonna help you get out, and they're gonna keep an eye on you."

"But Momma's *here*."

"I know." Spider-Man rubs his back. He spots a small action figure on the ground of the car, next to a book about Monster Trucks, and a present box that says '*Congratulations, Graduate*' on the top. "Hey, Demetrius, you wanna take this with you? Red Hood's my favorite, is he yours, too?"

Demetrius grabs the Red Hood figure like it's a lifeline. "My big brother plays basketball with him sometimes."

"That's so cool!" Spider-Man hurries away from the car while the kid is distracted. When he gets back towards the other people, he hands Demetrius to the girl with the braids. She's

alarmed, at first, but her face is steely and she holds Demetrius tight when Spider-Man tells her, “I need to see if there are more people that need help getting out. Can you take this group down the street, as far as you can?”

“Got it, Spider-Man.” She nods. Demetrius waves at Spider-Man when the woman starts shouting to the others. Spider-Man has to leave him, now, but he does check one last time on Demetrius’ mother on the way towards the actual apartment building. There’s nothing he can do for her besides putting a sticky note on the car door, with nothing written on it, so someone will be able to find her later.

It continues like that. For ten minutes, Spider-Man pushes through the destruction, moving concrete off of people, pulling students, families, pets out of the immediate danger. There’s still a constant buzzing on his skin, telling him that danger is *very* close, and won’t wait for him to get everyone out.

He tries to work as fast as he can. He sees the blur of Nightwing as he runs past, carrying two people over his shoulder. Spider-Man uses his webs to keep certain rooms from falling down onto another, trying to stabilize the floor as he gets people down and out.

On the third story, Spider-Man hears the whispers of someone in their living room. He braces himself when he smells the blood from down the hall.

He has to kick in the door to get it open. There’s the smashed bits of a counter in front of it, now pushed to the side. In the living room, a woman is clutching onto a man. The ceiling had caved in on his head, and he isn’t moving from underneath it.

gone.

~~*Peter held Karen’s hand for hours. The debris fell from the sky and crushed her.*~~

~~*Peter held Karen’s hand for hours. He didn’t want her to be alone.*~~

~~*He didn’t want to leave her. She said she wouldn’t leave him-*~~

“Ma’am?” Spider-Man breathes, kneeling down next to her. She’s thrown herself over his body, or what isn’t crushed, and she’s trying to breathe. She keeps whispering, tear tracks in the dust on her face. “Ma’am, can you look at me?”

“Can you get him out?” She asks him. She’s bleeding from a jagged scratch down her cheek. “Can you get my Mateo?”

“I know you don’t want to leave him.” Spider-Man holds her arm, and a wracked sob escapes her. “I know you don’t want to, but you’re in danger here.”

“Can you get my Mateo? I can’t do this without him.” She begs, refusing to let go of Mateo’s hand. “Can you get him?”

“We can’t bring him.” Spider-Man’s heart aches. The woman does not believe him. She shakes her head, whispering ‘*No no no*’ to either herself or to him. “What’s your name?”

“I have to bring my Mateo.” She’s starting to hyperventilate. Spider-Man grabs her hand, pulling her off of Mateo. “I can’t leave him. Can you get him?”

“We have to go. I’m so sorry.” And he *is*. But there’s no time to comfort her- he has to get her out of here. “I’m so sorry.”

The woman can’t speak. Spider-Man picks her up when he notices her bad leg, and she’s sobbing so hard she can’t struggle against him. He doesn’t know how many times he says ‘I’m sorry’ to her in the few seconds it takes to swing down and leave her in the hands of a first responder.

close! bad! !!!!! get out!

Spider-Man stills when he gets to the fifth floor. There’s another bomb nearby, like he suspected. He follows along the hallway in a hurry- does he get the bomb, or does he get the people out? How many are left? Is he *able* to carry that many people?

close!! friend!

He looks behind him as he makes his way closer to the danger. Red Robin has entered the floor, wearing a rebreather over his mouth. Wait, should Peter have one of those? His mask isn’t the best at ventilation. But it should be fine...

The moment he recognizes Spider-Man there, Red Robin sighs with relief. “Spider-Man, there you are. We tried contacting you on comms.”

Oh, shit. Spider-Man forgot he even had his comm in his ear. He’s not used to having multiple people on the other side. He clicks it on- he had set it to their frequency earlier, Damian must have told them that he knew it. He can hear Oracle relaying information, but that’s about it. She must have set it that way on purpose- less voices crowding the frequency, but still getting info from everyone.

“What is it?”

“Batman and Robin are handling Firefly. He set off two more bombs down the street, but we had just evacuated the buildings down there.”

“There’s another bomb in this building.” Spider-Man tells him, looking back down the empty, dark hall. “I think a lot of people were able to get out when the first one went off here, it mostly damaged the sixth floor and the third floor. There’s been seven casualties so far.”

“You can tell all that?” Red Robin asks. Spider-Man nods.

“There’s... still some people in this side of the building, I can hear them on the lower floors, they’re getting out. We can-”

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

“No time.” Spider-Man cuts himself off. He follows his senses- not just the spider-sense blaring stronger when he gets nearer to the bomb, but also the smell of it. It’s a much more

serious affair than the last bombs they were around- he can feel the imminent danger, the groaning of the building as it relents under the weight.

They need to get *out*. They can't take another bombing, this building is going to collapse. Except they can't just *leave* the bomb here to go off and cause more destruction, can they? Red Robin doesn't protest going to find the bomb, so he assumes he's making the right choice here.

GET DOWN!!!!

Or not.

"Shit! Double R, Spider-Man-"

Oracle doesn't have enough time to warn them. Spider-Man yanks Red Robin down to the ground with him just as the wall caves in above them. Spider-Man ducks himself over Red Robin as the concrete comes down, striking him on the head. The world goes black.

-

There's an annoying ringing in his ear when he comes to.

Tim has a hand pressed to his throat, checking for a pulse. He's all blurry, but everything is so *bright*- Shit. Peter feels cool air brush against his cheek and he has to close his eyes.

His mask is torn, or at least the eye of his mask is. Peter groans and slaps Tim's hand away, pushing away from him to try and sit up.

Baaaaad idea.

Peter's head swims and he resists the urge to vomit right then and there. There's a metallic smell that keys him in to why there's a warm dripping of not-water down his face. Red Robin grabs his shoulders to make him sit still, and Peter blinks through the double vision and the groggy underwater feeling.

"Don't move so fast." He can hear Red Robin over the ringing. Which is a good sign.

"That's what your mom said."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Peter leans over himself, blinking out the stupid light in his eyes.

close!! bad

!!!

get away move!!

friend danger get out move!!

!! hello !!

His spider-sense is so noisy. If Peter didn't have what he is 78% sure is a minor concussion, he'd be able to tell *why*. But when he tries to think about anything outside of his immediate area, he also starts thinking about barfing his guts up in front of Tim, and that's a no-go.

"Yeah, he's alive." Red Robin says to someone. Peter touches his ear- where'd his comm go? He had it a second ago. That makes him sad... Tony gave that to him. "Well he just made a your mom joke so it can't be too bad."

"I'm perfectly fine." Peter glares at Red Robin, but the older boy does not care in the slightest. Red Robin opens his utility belt to grab a flashlight, and Peter spots his comm. "You bitch. Give that back."

"Excuse you?"

Peter snatches the comm out of Red Robin's utility belt. "How'd you even get this?"

"It fell out when you hit your head. Your mask got a little shredded." Red Robin says a little, but Peter is sure it's gotta be half of his face. Red Robin reaches up to Peter's face, forcing open his eye, and shines the light into it. Instantly, Peter is blinded so badly he thinks he'll never see again. His eye waters, and without thinking, Peter grabs the flashlight and throws it.

Red Robin looks at his empty hand while Peter blinks through the pain. "I need to check your pupils, you pissy toddler. Or do you think you're magically fine after experiencing head trauma?"

"I said 'I'm fine.'" Peter slurs, pressing his fingers over his eyes. "I got a thick skull."

"That's for sure." Tim snarks.

bad bad bad!! get out!!

Peter squints. There's light coming from his right- oh, would you look at that. A giant hole was ripped through the building. Peter can see the streets below, and some nasty awful bitch in a helicopter is trying to shine a spotlight into the building. Tim reaches under Peter's arms and drags him down the hall, pulling him over the rubble, and away from sight of the public outside.

To his left, Peter's spider-sense is trying to fill in gaps that he can't see, both because his vision is all blurry and because opening his eyes stings like a bitch. Batman and Robin are definitely nearby, and based on the constant danger, that means Firefly is too. There's no sound of a drone...

"Firefly."

"Yep."

“Crashed?”

“Crashed into the building. Drone’s broken. B and Robin are working on it.”

Tim has pulled out a mask from his utility belt and some kind of glue, when Peter opens his eyes. Peter is affronted when Tim doesn’t even ask, he just starts using his thumb to rub the glue over Peter’s eye area, his other hand pulling the destroyed Spider-Man mask down.

“Rude.”

“Payback.” Tim replies easily.

“Kay, Mary Poppins,” Peter’s clever nickname gets no reaction out of Tim, which is insane because Peter’s head feels like it got cracked open and he’s still funny enough to make that joke, so he deserved at least a laugh. “We got bomb.”

“Noting that your speech is choppy. Hey, kiddo, what’s your other symptoms?” Tim presses the mask over Peter’s eyes. He holds it down on Peter’s skin to make sure the glue sticks- it’s a bad sensation. Peter hates it, hates hates hates it. God, that’s awful.

“You wear this on purpose?”

“Yeah?”

“Bad texture. 0/10 would not recommend.”

“Is it better on your eyes, though?” Tim asks, pulling his hand away when the mask can stick on it’s own.

Hm... Peter sees what he means. Identity: saved. Lights: dimmer. “I’ll give you this one.”

“Great.” Tim claps his hands. “We need to-”

!!!!

Peter’s arm reaches out and pulls Tim back as the wall on their left gives in. This time, it’s not as bad, and no concrete comes falling down on Peter’s head. Just a Batman falling through the wall and landing on the floor in front of them, where Tim had been a second ago, with his chest burned in a ring and smoking. Firefly cackles loudly, and Batman is back on his feet without a word, leaving them again.

“How’d you do that?” Tim asks.

“Do what?”

“React that fast?”

Peter hums. “I’ll tell you... when talking’s not bad.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, come on, kiddo.” Tim tries to pull Peter onto his feet. Peter shakes his head as if that would ever help relieve the pain behind his eyes. “We need to get out of here.”

“No, we gotta get that bomb.”

Peter’s refusal comes with Peter walking the opposite direction of where they would go to get out. He makes his way towards where the bomb is instead, following the buzzing of his spider-sense that tells him danger is close by and he’s being stupid.

“How bad is your head right now?” Tim asks, but luckily, he’s not pressing to make Peter leave. He follows Peter, who’s slowly gaining some stability.

“I’ve had worse.” Peter replies honestly.

“Not reassuring.” Tim comments. Peter doesn’t grace that with a reply.

He *has* had worse. He’s pushed through a lot to get shit done. He kept going when he got gunshots, when he broke his leg, when he almost lost his hand-

When he was bleeding out after he got bit by the-

“Ugh.” Peter leans one hand on the wall and takes a deep breath. That’s a bad thought!

“Nightwing is on the way.” Red Robin says suddenly, snapping Peter out of his almost-barf. Peter looks up at him. Red Robin is frowning, one hand hovering over his shoulder like he didn’t know if he could touch him or not. “Stay right here and wait for him, okay? You did great.”

“Boo you.” Peter stands up straighter. Like hell is he gonna lay down and take a nap when everyone is still in danger. He lifts his arm to an apartment door, and *attempts* to open it like a normal person. But what Peter did not know was that a concussion led to him not really feeling his body all that normally, and his strength his hard to hold back. The door *slams!* open, hitting the wall and bouncing back to the frame. It groans in protest, swinging back open, then peels itself off of the hinges and crashes to the floor with a thud.

Peter and Tim stare down at the door. Peter looks up at him.

“Oops.”

“Oops? That’s all you have to say about that?”

Peter raises his voice to mock Tim’s. “*That’s all you havetasay bout that?*” He then jams his thumb inside and steps onto the broken door to get inside the apartment. “Bombs in here.”

“Just great.” Tim mutters as Peter starts searching the empty apartment. “Another family member that loves to be a pain in the ass.”

Peter ignores Tim, trying to make sense of his spider-sense. That’s... an odd phrasing. Sense of his spider-sense.

Right, focus. There's a bomb.

close bad get out get out get out heavy

What does heavy mean? It doesn't sound good, whatever it is. Peter leans on the counter as Tim makes his way into the apartment. It's no use trying to pinpoint it exactly, there's just a lot going on. Peter feels like his spider-sense is all over the place. It alerts him to the bomb nearby, by it's also trying to tell him that the building is unstable, and it's warning him about Batman and Robin and Firefly as their fight progresses through the building.

Peter crouches down, pulling at the neck of his suit. It's either hot in here, or Peter is the one that feels like he's burning up. His hair is sticky- Oh. When Peter pulls back his hand, it's not sweat, but a lot of blood that coats his gloved hand. It drips down onto his web shooter like it's dripping down his forehead and his cheek.

"Talk to me, Spider-Man." Tim prompts. "I heard you stole Batman's cape earlier."

"I'm legally Batman now."

"That's not how it works."

Red Robin makes his way around the apartment, pulling out shelves and cabinets, and when that doesn't work, he starts banging on the walls. The apartment is empty, not even furniture inside. It's much more spacious than a New York apartment, though. Peter wonders what rent is like in Gotham.

"How did he do it?" Peter asks, watching Red Robin beat on the living room's wall. After the third hit, it sounds fuller underneath his fist. Red Robin tries again, and sure enough, it's there.

Red Robin pulls out a knife from his belt and jams it into the wall. "How did he what?"

"Get past my spider-sense."

That's the part that Peter still doesn't get. With Loki, he at least will get a warning before he gets close to Peter. He's never had anyone get close enough to grab him. His therapist, Lucy, she said Peter's always had to be aware, even before his spider-sense. That the reason why it's probably so fine tuned is because Peter has C-PTSD, and always had to *know*. He had to know where the exits are, had to read the room before he said the wrong thing. Peter doesn't know how close that could be to the truth, because it's not like they have a measure for him to look at. There are no other Spider-People out there to tell Peter if he's a normal spider-mutant or if he's fucked up in the head.

Tim pulls apart the wall, revealing the bomb underneath. Firefly must have planted the bombs a while ago, and was waiting to set them off for a good moment.

"Your spider-sense works on vibrations, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

“He probably used some deep diving techniques. Slowed his heart rate down-”

“Bullshit.” Peter breathes out. “That can not be a real thing.”

Tim sticks his tongue out as he works on dismantling the bomb, a bead of sweat tracing down his brow. Peter feels his head swim again and his eyes flutter closed. Deep breath in, deep breath out. “Want a different answer?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“He’s Batman.”

Peter scoffs at that. Whatever the hell *that* means, he supposes. He’ll just have to pry the real answer out of the Bat when this is over.

!!! GET OUT!!!

His eyes shoot open and he gets onto his feet. Just as Tim snips the last wire of the bomb, Peter hurries up to grab his arm. Tim, alarmed, barely manages to ask what is wrong before Peter says, “We need to get out.”

OUT HEAVY GET OUT!!!

The building creaks. There’s a thud from overhead that shakes the building. Peter drags Tim out of the apartment as another thud hits. Dust falls from the cracks in the ceiling as they hurry back down the hallway. The buzzing doesn’t stop- that constant air that everything is about to *wrong wrong wrong*.

!!!! UNDERNEATH !!!!

Peter thwips a web to the ceiling above them as another hit wracks the building. This time, it’s accompanied by the screeching of metal and the floor giving way from underneath them. He falls down first as the floor lets go, but the web he sent out catches him. His arm yanks, vision swimming in front of him. The rubble is a mix of image and afterimage.

He reaches *BEHIND!!* him just in time to snatch Tim out of the air. Tim holds on to his arm with a grip for life, and when Peter looks down he sees nothing but a giant hole underneath them. The building whines under the pressure while Peter lifts Tim up, trying to get back up on the floor because the lower ones are more unstable.

Tim reaches out his grappling hook to help, but-

!!!! GOES!!!

The part of the ceiling that the webbing had latched onto finally gives way. The cement falls down as they do. Peter tries to stick his arm out to find another holding for his web, ignoring the pain blaring in his head. The webbing catches Tim’s leg and Peter yanks him up. Tim twists just in time to avoid steel rebar sticking out from the rubble.

They both crash onto the ground. Peter hisses when his forehead smacks against pavement.

Whoa, okay. Maybe the concussion is worse than he thought it was.

He loses a few seconds- or a few minutes? He can't tell. When he finally manages to open his eyes again, he pushes himself up on his arms.

"Coupon?" Peter's voice feels scratchy. He coughs out the dust and smoke that is coating his lungs.

It's dark down here. He looks up above them, trying to count how many levels they fell down. Looks like... two? No. Four... No, six? Shit, wait, he's seeing more than double now. Peter groans, dragging himself onto his knees, and calls out again, "Coupon? You 'kay?"

"Yeah," Tim does not *sound* okay. "Come- Come help me lift this."

Peter gets onto his feet, but is crouched over with his hands out in front of him. His balance is thrown off, and his feet feel like they aren't beneath him anymore. When Peter finally catches sight of Tim, he sucks in a breath. Tim's leg is caught underneath a heavy piece of rubble.

"Shit," Peter hisses.

"It's fine, I'm okay." Tim assures, way more calm about this than he should be. "It's only been a couple seconds. Help me push this off?"

HEAVY!! GET OUT!!!

Peter's hands lift over his head and he twists on his feet. He almost collapses like the floor above them, but he holds steadfast as it reigns down. He sees Tim cover his head before he closes his eyes. The rubble slams onto Peter's shoulders, everything screaming at him. His head, his spider-sense, and then his muscles.

Peter can't speak. He can barely breathe.

He's never held up this much weight before- he's never even tested how far his strength can go. He can catch buses, he can break down doors. But as the tons of weight threaten to crush him and Tim, Peter's body is begging him to let it go, to drop that weight before it rips him apart.

"*Fuck-* Okay, okay, kid, just- just hold on." Tim is saying, and Peter can't even gripe back '*what the fuck else would I do?*'

He breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth. A cough racks his body and the rubble shifts, but he refuses to let it fall any further. When Peter cracks open his eyes, he can't tell if his vision is giving out, or if they're really in the pitch dark.

"*-obin, come in.*"

"Oracle!" Tim shouts, and Peter hisses at the noise. God, he hates noise! "Sorry, Spider-Man. O, we need an evac ASAP."

“Nightwing and B are on their way. Firefly was knocked out and is being transported. What’s going on?”

“We’re trapped.” Tim says. As Peter’s eyes refuse to adjust, Peter strains his ears to hear. There’s shuffling from where Tim lay underneath that cement, and the scratching of it as Tim attempts to pry it off. “We were getting out when the building collapsed. My leg is pinned underneath some cement, Spider-Man is holding up- Damn, I think he’s got to be holding up the *building*.”

“Spider-Man, can you hear me?”

“Ugh.” Is all Peter manages to bite out.

“Adding N and B to the comm.” Oracle says. There’s a click in Peter’s ear and Nightwing’s voice filters through.

“Are you two okay?”

“Not for long,” Tim says, oh-so-optimistically of him. “I’ve almost got this cement off my leg. I think I see an out- I think- Southwest from the front of the building? Maybe? We fell a couple stories, and it’s unrecognizable down here...”

“We see it-” There’s double of Nightwing’s voice now, and Peter can hear the shuffling of rock coming from his right. “You see me?”

A light shines through their space. Peter grunts and Tim says something like ‘yes’, but everything is starting to white out. He can’t let this fall, not while Tim is here. Peter could maybe survive if it crushed him, but Tim is human, there’s no way. Even if Peter’s never lifted this much weight before, and it feels like everything is about to slip away-

“Spider-Man, hey, look at me.”

Peter opens his eyes again, the weight of the cement starting to shift towards the left as he leans. His legs tremble, starting to slip as well, and he panics when he sees Nightwing right next to him.

“Hey hey hey, it’s okay!” Nightwing holds his hands up. “B got Red Robin, see?”

When did-?

Tim’s really not there. There’s a line of blood across the ground where he was, dragged out through a hole that they made. Did Peter blank out that long?

“Listen to me,” Nightwing is all too calm about the fact that he’s gonna get crushed if he doesn’t get out. “I’m right here with you. The building’s really unstable, so I’m gonna help you set this down, okay?”

“You- superpowers now?” Peter grits out, and Nightwing gives him a thin smile.

“No, just super brilliant. Alright, I want you to crouch down, slowly. That’s it-” Peter would *really* like to set this shit down now- “-there you go, alright. Start leaning to the left... take your time, I know it’s a lot, but you’ve got this...”

Peter hears and feels the moment that the rubble is laid down to the side. And unlike what he was just doing- being calm, straightforward, and making sense- Nightwing reaches out and snatches Peter out from under the rubble. His vision swims and he stumbles out of the way with Nightwing when the building starts to fall over, careening towards the left. Nightwing ducks Peter’s head under his arm and shield him as the rubble crumbles, the ground shaking.

Tense silence, where all Peter can really hear is his own heart pounding in his chest. When the rubble stills, Nightwing drags Peter towards the opening that they had made, helping him climb out over the broken stone and metal.

Nightwing’s mouth is moving, but Peter can’t hear a word he’s saying. They’re on the other street opposite to where Peter entered the building in the first place. It’s nothing but empty space and destroyed buildings. Nightwing cups Peter’s face in both of his hands, thumb brushing over Peter’s temple and frowning.

Peter blinks and he’s sitting down on the ground. His muscles feel way too light.

Actually, *he* feels way too light. His entire body.

That’s new.

Peter blinks again and Nightwing is helping him up again.

Peter blinks, and he’s looking at the Batmobile in the street. It’s covered in sticky notes, and Batman is staring at it, with Tim slung over his shoulder.

“Forgot I did that.” Peter says, though it’s like someone else is saying it. “I’m really tired.”

He falls forward, and Nightwing catches him just in time. Peter’s out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

THE MOMENT WE'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR (take a shot and guess where Peter's gonna wake up next chapter LMFAOOOO!!) I've been WAITING for this one. We got Jason POV (my love,,, <33), them finally talking about their theories out loud (and leaving Dick out of the loop for a good reason: Dick 100% is going to have a Rough Time). Loki and Peter are my fav part of this chapter tbh. Just... Loki **had** to know about Peter and his shenanigans that he pulled. I dropped a couple hints as to why Loki is even bothering with this in this chapter too ;).

Bruce is a girl dad and you will have to rip that out of my cold dead hands. FUCK canon, there's only ME now. That's why he's like this, if you're like "this Bruce doesn't

act exactly like canon." Bruce is MINE now. He LOVES his kids and he would NEVER intentionally harm them. so he sends his daughters flowers!!!! and he is learning to apologize!!

i lowkey have been having art block for the last week so if you don't see me posting art as much, that's why. i am still active on there, don't worry! i see all of your comments, your AMAZINNNNNG fan-art, and tiktoks (and i try to interact as much as i can!!)!! i only just realized i could repost them so if you made one of these and you see me reposting even though i found it a week prior, that's why LOL

again: thank you all for your love and support. it means the world to me that this story has reached so many!

and i never minded being on my own

Chapter Summary

“Is that a T-Rex!?” Peter can’t help but sound delighted. Peter will never be too cool for a T-Rex. “Why do you have a T-Rex!? Is it alive? No, it can’t be. But does it come to life? Is it a robot?”

“I like dinosaurs.” Bruce replies, and Peter can tell he’s proud of it. “No, it doesn’t come to life. It’s a robot that has been deactivated.”

“I think it should. You can have a Bat-Rex! Literally no one would go against a Bat-Rex.”

Chapter Notes

HEYYYY BESTIES!!!! I was a day behind on my writing schedule. Boooo, know, im also not happy with that, but life, as always, got in the way. However, i coming bearing gifts! nothing bad happens!! I swear! (if you saw my tiktok, be prepared)

So:

trigger warnings- dissociation, talks of child abuse (this time there's description of injury)

word count- 27,261

Again... would you even believe me if I said this chapter WASN'T supposed to be this long? Everyone say "Thank you Beta Reader Tyler for keeping Erin's brain functional"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Gotham is not a quiet place unless danger is trying to settle in. The city is constantly abuzz, constantly alive. In the daytime people are out living and working, breaking their backs trying to survive in the hell. And in the nighttime there’s the beating of club music that sounds like the city’s heart. Gotham is always awake, and Peter has started to grow accustomed to the sound of her noise the way he knows New York’s.

In fact, the only time in his life that Peter had started getting a *quiet* sleep was when he started living with Tony.

Being that high up in the air in a penthouse, it's hard to hear the traffic below. Nothing is *silent*, because Peter's senses are just that fine tuned, but that's because Peter keeps the soundproofing feature off. One reason is that Peter is not used to silence after living in Queens. His home with Ben and May had been noisy, the foster homes were noisy, and then the streets were a cacophony. He got so used to it, that Peter couldn't sleep properly the first week that he stayed with Tony, and it helped to not have the soundproofing feature on.

But another reason is that he doesn't mind hearing the humming of the fridge in the kitchen, or when someone gets up to get a glass of water in the night, or Tony's arc reactor keeping him alive. Because this Not-Silence means that Peter is not alone, but in a safe way. It's not the noise of the city, but it's home nonetheless.

So when Peter hears this same type of Not-Silence after opening his eyes and is lost in the hazy moments of waking up, he almost rolls over and goes right back to sleep, believing that he's back home. He feels like he has to get as much sleep as he can before FRIDAY wakes him up for school. He almost forgets everything that has happened since he met Ohnn, and he feels completely safe for the first time in a while.

Almost.

Because at *first* it felt that way, but then he discovered the Not-Silence is *not* the same.

Firstly, there's a heartbeat right next to his bed. He knows them, and they are not from home. This heartbeat is accompanied by the tip tapping of someone typing on a keyboard and their soft breathing. Secondly, there are footsteps far from where he is, muffled by heavy wooden walls. The floors in his home are no softened on rugs or behind wooden walls. Thirdly, a radio in a distant room, with a song that isn't distinguishable.

This is *not* Peter's room.

Then he thinks he might be back at Benny's, because he remembers that he is *not home not home not home*, but that doesn't sound right *either*; and he almost panics. But he knows the heartbeat beside this bed, and it hits him: This is not the room that he has been staying in for (nearly) the past month. The thought strikes him hard and forces him to open his eyes fully and ignore the ache in his chest.

Peter sits up, a painstakingly slow action, as if one wrong move would have him activate a secret trap.

It's not a tiny room with a closet, bed, window, and desk, which are all the things that a person needs to thrive. Secondly, it doesn't have any of the stuff he's gotten used to- it's not a cramped place with peeling wall paper and a pipe that groans every five seconds. It doesn't have a window that rattles in the wind, or the screeching of car tires outside. And it certainly doesn't have any of his stuff in it. Like his notebooks, his backpack, his tool kit. Non ha niente.

Nada, zero, zilch.

He's laying in a stupidly huge bed (What is it, a *king sized*? Who the fuck even *needs* a king sized bed?), and it's covered in thick blankets (those are actually kind of nice, he'll admit that). It's one of those canopy beds; the kind that have the curtains around it. Peter thought those were fake beds made for TV sets, and that real people didn't have them. He thought everyone knew they only existed in period dramas.

Somehow, this giant bed doesn't take up that much space in Not-His-Room, and that's because it's *also* huge. It has not just one window- which was already the height of luxury- but *three*, all with thick green curtains, all on one wall to the left of this bed. On the opposite wall to the windows, to his right, there is a shelf that stretches the entire wall, surrounding a grand desk. Save for a few books close to the door in front of him, it is empty, with no little knick knacks or decorations. It's as if this room isn't used often, or had *just* been cleared out, and there's no dust to tell him which is true. There's also another door that Peter is suspicious leads to a connected bathroom.

There's even a huge green and gold rug with those tassel things- he remembers Aunt May used to complain about how much rugs cost, but she always wanted a big nice one. She'd be all over this rug, nerding out and telling Peter about it. The dark walls are bare, but every crevice of the room is built like someone had hand carved the wood with those twisty designs that art people like. The nightstands have a big shiny lamp on the one to his right, the left one bare.

There's even a chandelier. *A chandelier.*

Who needs all that window space? Who needs a desk that someone could land a plane on? Who needs a wall-to-wall library in their room? Who needs a rug that's bigger than an open field? Who needs the hand carved wood and the shiny lamp, and *who* needs a chandelier in their room?

Truly, utterly awful.

Peter's room at home is big, yeah. He's still not used to that- to be able to do a flip and not knock over everything within his vicinity. He has FRIDAY to talk to, he can't hear his neighbors shouting at each other, nothing breaks if he looks at it wrong. And of course, it comes with two billionaires, one a superhero, living down the hall. But he's got a *normal* sized bed for a *normal* sized teenager, and it looks like Peter has stepped into the future, rather than stepping into a dark castle where a vampire is 100% going to jump out of a corner to snap his neck.

Overall, Peter can only come to one conclusion once he has awoken, seen this room, and felt the pounding headache behind his eyes, all while remembering Nightwing catch him before he passed out in front of a sticky-note covered Batmobile. Just as Jason had warned him about, Batman had kidnapped him.

Because honestly, what other candidate would there be? This has that big headed billionaire's hands *all over it*.

Unless, of course, it was Dick. Both seem to be top two in the 'will take an homeless orphan home' list. He should have asked Jason more about that.

The problem is? Peter can't even be *mad* about waking up in someone else's house. He can't put up a fuss and complain, because what else were they going to do? Bring him back to Benny's and say "*Here you go?*" Were they gonna take him to a *doctor*? At the *hospital*? Were they gonna leave him on the street and hope for the best? He doesn't have any allies here except for them, so it's a logical conclusion, *and* an easy excuse they used.

Peter *is* still gonna be upset about it, however. He won't whine about it or anything like that (okay, he might make a few jokes, sue him), but he feels he has a right to be reasonably put-off about the situation. He put in a lot of effort to not get brought here, and he just *had* to go and pass out after lifting a building. It feels like they won, and all because he hadn't been clever enough to get them out of the situation before it got as bad as it did.

...He had at least got to show Batman he won't be outdone, in some way. Sure, they finally got Peter at their house. But he thinks he's proved, somewhat, that he could get away if he wanted to.

(Does he want to? He's unsure. The dumb bed is comfortable and Peter forgot what a decent mattress was like.)

There's *one more* issue, and one that he doesn't know how to feel about. He's not wearing his spider-suit or his new jacket, but instead wearing a soft white, long sleeved shirt, and sweatpants. Someone had changed him, and because he doesn't feel sticky or bloody or dusty from the aftermath of the Firefly bombings, they had also gave him a bath of some kind.

It makes his skin crawl to think that it happened while he was passed out, but he supposes it's like what would happen if he was at the hospital, but instead of a dumb looking gown, he got actual clothes. And besides... his reflexes would have shut down anything that was meant to harm him. He can't exactly turn that off, even in his sleep. If his body had felt like he was being hurt, he would have woken up, or someone would have gotten punched. Or both.

Peter flexes his hands. It feels wrong to see them without a layer over them; he usually wears fingerless gloves for his day to day. Not because he's emo or whatever, but because he has a visible scar on his right hand: the spider-bite.

It's his last scar that he's ever gotten. Right above his thumb on the back of his hand, there's two diagonal puncture wounds. The scar tissue is faded, barely even white, but they are there. It could be passed over without anyone noticing it, if they weren't paying attention. But there's also a layer of spider veins under the bite. They're a dark blue color closer to the center, but fade out into a spider web of white farther from it.

Peter takes his gloves off when he washes his hands and takes a shower, because he's not gross and nasty and disgusting. But it always bothers him when people take it off when he's sleeping. The SHIELD doctors did that to him after Tony got him back. If Peter was alone in this Not-His-Room, he would have started looking for something to cover it again.

But he's not alone.

"Good evening, Sleeping Beauty."

“I knew a vampire lived here.” Peter replies immediately to Tim, the culprit of the heartbeat and the keyboard clacking that he heard. Tim raises a brow at him like *Peter* is the weird one. But Peter wasn’t the one who greeted someone with ‘good evening’ and sounded like it wasn’t part of the joke.

The other boy is sitting in a chair next to Peter’s bed, one foot in a medical brace kicked up on the mattress while he looks at his laptop on his lap. He has a set of crutches leaning against the back of the chair, and he’s wearing the most casual clothes that Peter has seen him in, just a regular sweatshirt and sweatpants.

He’s relaxed, slouched back in the chair like he’s been there a while. He glances over Peter as if double checking something.

“Is someone mad that they got kidnapped?” He teases, a low blow considering this is no laughing matter. (It might be when the annoyance of being taken care of turns into being grateful someone wants to take care of him. But that’s a later problem.)

“You’re lucky that I like you.” Peter lays back down on the stupidly soft pillow, glaring at the canopy bed.

“God forbid you live in opulence and with zero threat to your person.” Tim shuts his laptop, laying his hands over it and giving Peter his full attention. A thoughtful look crosses his face, and as though surprised, “You like me?”

Peter stares at him, dumbfounded. He thought it had been pretty clear for at *least* a few days now that Peter and Tim are friends. Why else would he *say* that to Tim during the Two-Face incident? “No, Tim. I don’t like you at all. That’s why I called you my friend, enjoy your presence, and held up a building so you wouldn’t die.”

“Whatever,” Tim says, but he grins like it’s a big deal to hear it. “I like you too, you little freak of nature.”

He grins smally at the other boy, covering his right hand with his left. Tim looks down at the action, his smile dropping hesitantly. He sighs almost silently, setting his laptop to the nightstand and bringing his foot off of the bed so he can properly sit up, facing Peter.

“Thanks for the save back there, Spider-Man.”

It’s not the question that Peter expected, nor is it the anger for being lied to. Peter doesn’t know why he’s so surprised by that. He hadn’t felt that bad about lying to the Avengers because at the time, they had been using Peter as an informant on the missing kids in Queens, and he had a lot to protect back then. He had no way of knowing that everything would have turned out fine for him if he had just spoken to them, so yeah. He told them his name was Parker, and he lied about having a mother still around, and he hadn’t felt like he was a shitty kid for that.

But he had felt sort of guilty about keeping it from the Bats, after they had more than shown to him that they weren’t an enemy. He expected some kind of jab about it, but it hadn’t come yet. Except maybe from Damian calling him a block-head when they were swinging around on Halloween.

~~(Maybe it'll still happen.)~~

“Don’t mention it, Red Robin.” Peter replies with a grin.

He eyes the crutches behind Tim, and the boot that’s on his foot. He’s not nearly as injured as Peter would have expected from that fiasco, which means that either Peter has been in a coma for months, or Tim wasn’t as injured as he could have been. As if sensing Peter’s worry, Tim sighs and assures Peter: “I’m okay, Peter. Just a broken foot. You made sure of that.”

“So I didn’t go into a coma?”

“What? No. You just passed out from exhaustion.” Tim explains, waving off that concern.

“Sure did give everyone a scare, though. It’s amazing that you woke up literally *right* after Dick finally left your side. He’s been hovering *all day*. He only left when I told him I’d take up his post.”

“It’s only been a day?” Peter chooses to focus on that, because if he thinks about how much he had worried everyone, especially Dick, he’ll feel the need to throw up. And his headache doesn’t allow for emotional vulnerability at the moment.

There’s gentle footsteps in the hall outside the room, and Peter expects a visitor to enter. But they keep going past his door, down the hall. There’s the softest sound of a door opening and closing.

“Technically.” Tim shrugs. “We got back around 2AM, and you slept until...” Tim checks the watch on his wrist. “3PM.”

“Oh.” Peter thinks on that. “That’s not bad at all.”

It certainly isn’t. Last night, he had felt like all of his muscles were way too light, like he’d float up into the sky. But right now, he feels... a little sore? Peter had never lifted that much weight before, so he *knows* his body probably wasn’t ready for that. But he must have slept off most of the damage, because other than the headache, he feels fine. He’s had worse happen to him- like sleeping off gunshots for a couple days, and falling out of the sky and having his back get fucked up.

The door in the hall opens again, and the person- it’s a new person, someone Peter doesn’t know, because their heartbeat is not familiar to him- walks back down this way. This time, Peter’s spider-sense actually reacts to their presence as they near his door.

hello! old?

“Tell that to Alfie.” Tim smiles knowingly.

“Mr. Pennyworth?” Peter asks, eyeing the door. *watching* says his spider-sense, and Peter glances at Tim to see the other boy blatantly staring at Peter as the door opens.

“Just Alfred, Master Peter.” Mr. Pennyworth says as soon as he steps into the room.

Peter's never seen someone look so much like a cartoon character's inspiration than he has with this guy.

He's an older man that has a stern face, probably from years of not taking people's shit. He has a hooked nose and though he's bald at the top of his head, what hair he does have is perfectly white and well trimmed. He has a matching white mustache that could rival Gordon's, and he wears a tailored suit with a crisp black bow tie.

Despite looking like an orchestra conductor that runs his band like it's the military, Alfred's dark brown eyes crinkle when he walks up to stand next to the bed, setting a metal tray down on the covers. He looks like someone's grandpa that smiles with just his eyes- well, at least, a grandpa that has fought before. It's something about the way he carries himself, but Peter thinks that's what he's seeing... It's like the old man can't just turn it off, because he spent years in active combat. It's sort of how Peter sees Benny, or other veterans. Except Alfred is like... Like when Peter met Nick Fury.

Not to mention- Alfred is *British*. Yet another instance where Peter feels like he's stepped into a movie. He didn't think British people were real, either. (He's mostly kidding.)

"Hello, Mr. Alfred." Peter greets, unsure of what to make with a new person.

"*Just* Alfred." The man corrects again. "How are you feeling, Master Peter?"

"Like I got crushed by a building." Peter jokes, but when Alfred raises a brow, Peter replies more seriously. "Fine, sir. Just a little headache."

Tim snorts, and Peter glances suspiciously at him. Tim just shrugs, letting Peter know he's not gonna get to know what's so funny.

"That's good." Alfred turns his attention to the metal tray. There's some pain medication, a small device that looks like it's for taking blood pressure, and a grilled cheese sandwich with some kind of soup, along with a glass of water. "Your ability to heal is rather extensive. You had twisted your arm and sprained your shoulder, but it had fixed itself before I could examine it further. The same for the cut on your forehead. It had sealed itself back together while I was cleaning the wound."

"Yeah, that happens." Peter mumbles, not quite sure what to say.

"In the end, you just needed some fluids, a bath, and to sleep off the exhaustion. Your body was not prepared to carry that much weight. Likely from the malnutrition." Alfred lists off, and Tim claps his hands together, startling the both of them.

"That's my cue to leave." Tim says brightly. He collects the crutches and pulls himself out of the chair. He quickly reaches over the bed to mess up Peter's hair, and then does a whole show of using the crutches for as long as Alfred's eyes are on him. When Alfred looks away, Tim lets go of one of the crutches and shoots him a *don't snitch* look.

"See you in a little bit, Peter."

“Bye, Coupon.”

Tim scoffs as the door closes, leaving him alone with Alfred.

Which is so suspicious, isn't it?

No doubt, he had a million questions for Peter. Such as: Why did Peter lie and run away from them for an entire month? That's just one of *many* he can think of at the top of his head. But he hadn't asked them even though he had the time to do so... which is confusing. Why wouldn't he? Actually, why weren't they *all* crowding his room demanding to know everything? He's pretty much a sitting duck for that kind of thing at the moment, in this big stupid huge bed that Peter will need a real compass and a map to navigate getting the hell out of later.

When Tim leaves, Alfred sighs like he's gone through too much in a short period of time. He pops open the medicine bottle, hands two to Peter, then he pauses. He decides to give him one more, then closes it up again. He must know about Peter's metabolism. Unlucky for them both, the pain medicine only *might* help with the headache, but it'll go away on its own at some point.

“Thank you for helping me.” Peter takes the medicine and downs it with a couple gulps of water.

“Of course, Master Peter.” Alfred takes Tim's chair, sitting down next to him. The afternoon light drifting from the windows makes him look a little older, but nonetheless kind.

Peter tilts his head, smiling smally at the older man. It's such a ridiculous thing to be called, that Peter can't just *not* comment on it. “Do you *really* have to call me that? Do you work for Mr. Wayne?”

“I am his butler.” Alfred replies to the second question first, and Peter glances around the big fancy room again. *Butler*... Tim had mentioned that before, hadn't he? “The title is the same for all of my charges.”

“Say the word and I'll get you out of here, Mr. Alfred.” Peter sets the water down on the tray, and Alfred's brows raise at him. “What? It must be an awful lot of work handling *this* family. You need a getaway, I got you.”

“That is a generous offer, my dear boy, but I shall have to pass. And please, it is just Alfred.” Alfred sounds almost amused, in a dry way. He doesn't smile, but he does have a crinkle around his eyes that feels like it. “Now, I must insist you eat. We will be having dinner later this evening, but I imagine you are hungry now.”

Peter, indeed very hungry now that Alfred had pointed this out, pulls the tray onto his lap. Alfred sets aside the blood pressure machine on the nightstand, and Peter is about to compliment the *amazing* soup when Alfred continues speaking.

“Before I ask, I must tell you that what you say to me remains confidential.” Oh boy, Peter knows a bad sign when he hears one. He has a cheek full of grilled cheese and can't cut in, so

Alfred presses on unbothered. This was likely his plan to remain uninterrupted. “The others have medical files, all of which remain under my watch. They are able to be accessed by Master Bruce should the need arise, but otherwise, I am the sole person who can view them. However, for your case, I imagine you would not want prying eyes. That is alright with me. I shall not tell a soul, nor even write it down, if that is what you wish. But I *do* need to know your medical history, because while you are staying within this Manor or under any treatment of mine, I shall be taking part in the care of your health and recoveries. And I would like to be fully knowledgeable, so that I can provide my best assistance to you. Is all of this understood?”

Oh.

Peter looks down at his long sleeved shirt.

The idea that his clothes had been changed had made him sick not only because of the idea of being unclothed in front of someone, but also because there are scars there that Peter feels a... sort of shame about.

The spider bite that he received had given him an expert healing ability. Peter would have to be very, *very* damaged in order to have a scar remain. However, the scars that he had received before the bite stayed on his skin, and they are... not pretty. Faded, almost unnoticeable, really. And it's not like they're staying forever. He already knows that the smaller ones were healing over, making it appear as if nothing ever happened.

But they tell a lot about the kind of kid that Peter had been, and Peter doesn't like to think about that kid. He likes to think that he's an entirely different person than that one, now.

(He doesn't really think that.)

No doubt, Alfred had been the one to change him, and he had seen them. Not only that, but he mentioned malnutrition, which is something Peter has struggled with, and it means that Alfred had done some tests of some kind, or knows it when he sees it. Which means that lying? Not happening.

Not that Peter would lie about this anyway. It just seems like a silly thing to lie about. Alfred would figure it out either way.

(Who else saw the scars? Was it really just Alfred? Are the others going to know, and they just won't tell Peter?)

“Yes sir, I understand.” Despite knowing all of that, his voice feels a little wobbly and quiet. It's been a while since he had to run through something like this. The doctor that he goes to is SHIELD fielded, so she knows a lot about mutants and super powered crazies, and she's seen the brunt of it. However, even she had a frown on her lips when Peter had to talk about his medical history with her.

He tries to start the same way he started with her.

“Um, I used to have asthma and needed glasses to see far away.” Peter tells him, and Alfred nods to show he’s listening. “But after the spider-bite, I didn’t need them anymore. Sometimes my body will still think I do, though, and it can get hard to breathe. I broke my arm when I was three because I jumped off some steps. And I ate a penny and we never figured out if I, uh, passed that or not.”

See, that’s easier to tell someone. Silly, stupid little stories of him being reckless or a dumb kid. But what Peter doesn’t think is relevant is what no longer affects him.

“Um, do I have to tell you *everything*, like, after I got my powers? Because with my healing, it doesn’t really stick around...”

“Only what is still around.” Alfred tells him, voice reassuring but leaving no room for confusion. “Not a soul, Master Peter. Just you and I. I need to know how to help you should the need arise. For *anything*.”

It’s a great offer. But Peter’s skin itches thinking of the ‘anythings’ that he could tell Alfred.

It’s not malicious compliance when Peter doesn’t tell the older man everything. It’s not, he knows that- because unless it’s an injury that wasn’t mended or hadn’t scarred, he doesn’t need to alert Alfred to it. So he doesn’t tell Alfred about when he was ten and some concrete fell on him and broke his foot.

(The Battle of Manhattan took away his first foster family, and his parents’ old storage unit. So Peter wouldn’t get either a new family, or the pieces of his old one.)

He *does* explain away the five scars on his right arm:

“I got cigarette burns on my right arm when I was 11.”

But he skips over the part of his life where his hands got dry and cracked from overusing hand sanitizer and washing his hands too often. And when he couldn’t get to his inhaler and he had to go to the hospital.

(Kids slipped through the cracks after the Battle. So many people died, and so many others were left behind, and everyone was just desperate for a placement. Peter never got a normal house after that. It’s just his luck.)

But there is another scar that he can’t overlook, that he wishes would start to fade like the cigarette burns were. It’s the same one that he hopes Dick will never ask him about. That he hopes *no* one will point out.

“And the scar on my neck is from a broken bottle.”

His neck feels bare without a hoodie there to hide the scar, feels cold. He refuses to reach his hand up to touch it out of habit. Peter hadn’t looked at Alfred at all while he spoke. He chose to stare at the food and eat, trying not to think about how it happened or who gave it to him-

~~Get out of that house he’s gonna kill me he’s gonna kill me he’s gonna kill me he’s gonna kill me~~

-because if he does, he'll start to get angry and he only just woke up and everything is *fine*, now. Everything is fine. He's not the same kid anymore, because of what happened after.

Peter flexes his right hand again, where those two little dots that changed his life for the better sit on his skin.

"I was bitten by a genetically modified spider when I was 12." Peter says, and this time he actually looks at Alfred. The man has not made any indication, really, that he felt sick or hated the thought of Peter's old injuries, nor did he look like he was casting pity onto him. He just... looked like he was there. That he was listening.

"It genetically modified me as well, when it bit me. So I'm sort of human, sort of spider, now. I'm allergic to citrus fruits, vinegar, peppermint, tea tree, lavender, rose, cinnamon, and conkers. I can go into a sort of anaphylactic shock. I'm... slightly radioactive. Because *that* spider was, not all spiders. Just that one... Radioactive." Peter starts to ramble, and he has to pull it back before he goes off on a tangent. "Also, um, there was an, um, incident. Where someone injected me multiple times with a serum that was supposed to make me into a super soldier but it was defective and would have killed me if my metabolism hadn't eaten it up. But it did make me super sick every time and then for a couple months afterwards, and we don't know if that had any lasting effects on me or not."

The older man taps a finger on the arm rest of the chair. Peter doesn't need his spider-sense to tell him just how intently Alfred was listening, because it's plain as day in the way he observes Peter. He braces for questions pressing that issue-

~~He doesn't wanna remember that it hurt so bad let's not talk about it-~~

-but instead, Alfred reiterates, "Your strength, agility, and durability has increased since the spider bite."

"Yes sir?"

"But it is not as strong as it could be." Alfred tells him. Peter had heard something similar from his doctor back home, so he's not that surprised. "Is this because you have not been eating well this past month that you have been in Gotham, or is there a history of malnutrition?"

"...Both?" Peter guesses is the correct thing to say, and Alfred waits for him to continue. "Benny feeds me a lot, but it's not as much as I really need to eat. And I, uh, used to not have access to meals," Peter doesn't know if dropping the '*I was homeless when I was 12*' is something he's ready to talk about just yet. "-so I was eating about once or twice a day for about two years. We think I need to eat about five meals a day, but since it's not as practical time wise, I eat snacks and bigger proportions during meal times."

"How long has it been since you started eating as much as you were supposed to, and how long have you been in Gotham and had to eat less?"

Huh. That sounds suspiciously close to an innocent question that *really* asks him about his past. Alfred doesn't back down if he can tell Peter is suspicious.

Ugh, whatever. He knows he's gonna be honest and tell them shit anyway, so they're the ones who would be weird if they got the old guy to interrogate him.

"I've been eating regular meals for about 11 months, and I've been in Gotham for one month."

It's like he's checked off a box on Alfred's list, because the man nods and then grabs the blood pressure machine on the table without continuing on that. He stands up from the chair and Peter holds out his arm for him to wrap it around his arm. As Alfred turns the machine on, Peter decides it's his turn to ask his questions.

"Mr. Alfred?"

"Just Alfred, Master Peter."

"Mr. Alfred," Peter restates, because as long as Alfred is calling him *that*, Peter is calling him Mr. He'll wear the guy down eventually, he thinks. "There's a distinct lack of Waynes in this room asking me a million questions."

"How perceptive of you."

"Is that because you asked them not to?"

"Of course, Master Peter." Alfred replies easily, pulling out a notepad to scribble down the numbers on the machine. "Who do you think runs this house?"

"So *that's* why you don't need a getaway." Peter looks down at the machine again. It's not SHIELD or Stark tech, but it's managing to actually pinch his skin in order to get a reading. This can't be for the Bats, they're all human... as far as he can tell. They aren't secretly vampires, right? Jason had gotten offended about that vampire conversation they had... But they have heart beats?

hello! hello! hi!

Peter strains his ear to listen for the heavy boot steps that are coming closer.

"What are you thinking that causes such a face?" Alfred unclips the device when the machine turns off. He tucks the notebook into his suit pocket and gestures to the plate. "Don't let your food get cold, now."

"Oh, right." Peter picks up the grilled cheese as the door to the room opens. "Are any of the Waynes part of the undead?"

"Excuse me?"

Peter is mid bite when Jason closes the door behind him, a conflicting series of emotions all over his face. He leans back against the door for a second, then crosses over to stand at the foot of the bed, hands in his jeans pockets. Peter sits up straighter to greet him, grinning and putting one hand up to hide his mouth as he says, "Jafon!"

“Don’t chew and speak.”

“Please swallow your food before speaking, Master Peter.”

The two of them correct at the same time. Peter snorts a little because Jason, despite looking and acting nothing like Alfred, had sounded just like him. Jason shakes his head, observing Peter closely.

“Tim said you were up, so I figured I’d come check on you.” Jason crosses his arms. “You feeling alright?”

Peter glances at Alfred, sensing that if he tried the hilarious joke that didn’t work on Alfred, on Jason, while Alfred is still in the room, it would cause another eyebrow raise. “I’m fine. Right, Mr. Alfred?”

“Just Alfred, Master Peter.” He turns to Jason, now. “If you are here, Master Jason, then I will leave him with you. When he finishes his plate, do let me know.” Alfred tells him. When he passes by Jason, he pats the man’s shoulder. Jason nods like he’s been given a super serious job.

“Alright, Alfie.”

“Thanks again, Mr. Alfred.”

“*Just Alfred*, Master Peter.” Alfred repeats himself.

“We’ll work on it.” Peter sighs.

Jason huffs out a half-laugh at that as Alfred exits, crossing over to take the chair next to Peter’s bed. “You might as well give up now, kid. Not even Dickie could wear him down on that. And he has puppy dog eyes that have worn down the government and the occasional crime lord.”

Peter tilts his head. “Are *you* the ‘occasional crime lord’?”

Jason doesn’t reply. Instead, he starts digging into his pocket. “I found something of yours while I was helping out with the relief effort in the apartment complex.”

Peter takes the tattered red and black mask from Jason.

His Spider-Man mask is ripped into two halves. One side is covered in blood, the eye lens missing completely. The other half has a cracked lens, the eye looking up at him, dusty and old looking.

The first Spider-Man outfit had been a hoodie with a sharpie on spider-symbol, sweatpants, his sneakers, a black face mask, gloves, and a pair of black goggles. They were what he fished out of dumpsters and lost and founds and from a school that he didn’t attend. It was a shitty hero costume, but it had meant a lot to Peter. He still keeps that old suit in his wardrobe back home, in a box that Pepper had gotten for him when she saw he was just keeping it on the bottom of the wardrobe.

“To preserve it.” She had said, showing him how it locks. *“Until you get your own place to display it like Tony does with his suits.”*

“You think I’ll display it?”

“Of course, Peter.” She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. *“When you’re older and you have had a bunch of suits, it would be nice to look back on a few of the designs. Everyone else will have pictures, but you’ll have the progress right in front of you.”*

This was his first mask that Tony showed him how to make. It was much better than some blacked out goggles that dulled his senses for him. It was his first *real* suit, one that made him look like a professional. And it was one of the only things that he had from his home universe. The mask is probably the one part of his costume that means the most to him. It’s the identity he puts on to help people, to be stronger.

“I can throw it out, if you don’t want it.” Jason sounds hesitant. Peter looks up, a range of emotions hitting him all at once.

“No, I- I want it.” Peter grins, setting the mask down on his lap. “I’ll just have to make a new one. I kind of wanted to try something different with it anyways. Thanks for grabbing this for me.”

Jason nods, but he still looks a little uncomfortable. “No problem, kid.”

“Guess I’ll just rock a domino mask for a little while.” Peter tries for some light hearted humor, and Jason tries to smile like he’s accepting that, but it falls just flat enough in the silence that Peter thinks something else has to be going on.

Tim had addressed it, somewhat, but they hadn’t *talked* about the Spider-Man thing. And now, here’s Jason doing something similar. Peter wants them to just hurry up and ask, because he has been prepped for this for at least a week now. Jason leans on the arm rest like he’s trying to be relaxed, but his shoulders are tense and his grin doesn’t exactly reach his eyes. It falls away before it could even try to look real.

“You’re sure you’re fine?”

“Yeah, I’m all good. Didn’t they tell you?” Peter wonders. “I just over exerted myself with the building. I can sleep off pretty much anything. And eat it away, too.”

That manages to crack a grin on Jason’s face. He scoffs, leaning back in the chair and finally managing to relax just a little bit. “Yeah, I heard about your metabolism from Alfie. Get ready, kid, because you’ve never had a meal plan like his. Hell *know* if you skipped a meal or ate what you weren’t supposed to.”

“What am I not supposed to?”

“Fast food. Burgers. Pizza.” Jason starts to list off, and Peter’s eyes widen.

“What?”

“Forget about anything deep fried that he didn’t make himself. I’m pretty sure Dickhead and Tim have a snack stash somewhere that they aren’t sharing with everyone else. Hey, you’re not a sugar-fiend, are you? ‘Cause Dick is, and Alfie already has enough problems with keeping him from consuming diabetes in a box.”

“Please tell me if I crave a burger you’ll save me.” Peter is seriously considering that might be what manages to keep him away. *No burgers?* One would think he’d get tired of burgers, but something about his diet craves it. He gets burgers all the time while living at Benny’s. He’s gonna go through withdrawal!

“Hell no, Itsy Bitsy, you’re on your own. I am *not* risking Alfie’s disappointment.”

“Please?” Peter begs. “I’ll be your best friend forever!”

“Yeah, because being best friends with a 14 year old looks great on me.”

“You hate me.” Peter sighs, pulling out his secret weapon: his saddest face ever. Bucky described it once as *‘like kicking a puppy.’* “You hate me and for what? I didn’t even do anything!”

Jason fully turns around in the chair to look out the windows behind him. “Wow, would you look at that? The sun is actually out. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Coward.” Peter says, but it has no bite to it.

“It’s called being smart.” Jason taps his temple when he halfway turns around. “...Have you stopped pulling the face?”

“Why? Was it working?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Peter huffs, swirling his spoon around in the soup while Jason turns around fully again.

... He tried to be patient, but it’s still nagging at him.

Tim and Jason are both sort of dancing around the part where they ask their questions and get their answers. It can’t *just* be because of Alfred telling them not to, can it? Didn’t Tim say that Dick had been here, but he had just left? Where did he go? Peter doesn’t know what to do with himself when he’s the one with more questions, it makes him feel lost. He thought he’d be answering and explaining...

He *also* thought he wouldn’t be at Wayne Manor, but that part was wrong. Maybe this is how it normally is for them, and he got that all wrong? They just asked him so many questions *before* knowing his identity that it feels like they would have even *more* now. And the main culprit for that isn’t even here at the moment.

“Tim said Dick was here?”

Jason chews his bottom lip, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. He clears his throat before he speaks. “Yeah, he was. He stayed with you pretty much the entire time, but he had some stuff to take care of, so he asked Tim to be here if you woke up while he was out. He’ll be back in a little bit to bother you.”

“He’s not a bother.” Peter manages a grin.

“Trust me, when he gets back, you’re gonna get sick of the hovering. *‘Peter, do you want water?’ ‘Kiddo, you want another five pillows?’ ‘Want me to steal Bruce’s card and buy you an ice cream shop, bud?’*” Jason sounds like he’s speaking from harrowing-but-not-really-experience, a fond smile on his face like he’s pulling all of the examples out of a couple memories.

“When do you think he’s gonna be back?”

“Uh, well, he’s... Getting some paperwork done.” Jason runs a hand through his hair.

“...Paperwork?”

“Yeah, just some stuff, not really important.” Jason then glances at him, and he adds on quickly: “I mean- It *is* important, because otherwise he’d be here. ‘Cause you’re important too.”

It’s like he’s trying to save face, but for *why*, Peter is genuinely lost on.

“Riiiiight...” Peter says slowly. He thinks he stepped on a conversation bomb. In the time he’s known Jason, he’s never seen him act so skittish, like he doesn’t know what to say, so he’s skirting around the topic. “That’s alright. I just feel bad I passed out on him.”

“He’s had crazier shit happen to him, trust me on that one. He’s just glad you’re alright. We *all* are.” Jason is rubbing his hands together awkwardly, and he looks around the room in search of something to say. “Don’t worry about it, ‘kay? He’ll be back soon.”

“...If you say so.”

There’s another few seconds of silence between them. Peter doesn’t know what Jason is feeling, but Peter is feeling like Jason is waiting for something to happen. Or like he knows something, but he doesn’t want to say it.

“Jason?”

“Yeah?” Jason looks back at him.

“Is everything alright?” Peter has to ask, because his mind is coming up with worst case scenarios and *man* it would suck if he had ended up being wrong about these guys. Like, it would majorly suck. Peter doesn’t want to go into hiding *and* have to try and catch Ohnn to stop him from tearing apart the multiverse.

Jason stares at him, his lips pressing into a thin line as he contemplates what to say. It feels like a bad sign, so Peter prepares himself for the worst. He can almost *feel* the ‘we don’t want

you here' about to fall out of the guy's mouth, and Peter will have to leave but would he be able to go back to Benny's or would they chase him out of Gotham-?

"I'm not gonna lie to you." Jason says, and Peter winces as he braces for impact. Jason pauses, just staring at him like Peter had said something.

He waits for Jason to say something, anything, but it doesn't come. He just furrows his brow, eyes zoned in like Peter's a puzzle that is concerning him. He finds himself speaking before he can make himself stop. But hey, humor is his best coping mechanism.

"...Are you about to cut to commercial break or something? 'Cause I don't have the money to pay for ad-free bad news."

"What? No, no." Jason sighs and puts his head in his hands. "No, Peter, it's not bad news. On your part. You did nothing wrong, okay?"

"Oh."

"I don't like that you're a vigilante."

"Wow. Okay," Peter ignores that *that* feels like a stab to the chest. Because holy shit, the one guy that Peter thought was the chilliest out of all of them despite possibly(?) being a murderer that Peter thought was pretty cool just told him that the most key part of who he is is not approved of. "Sure *sounds* like I did something wrong."

"That came out wrong. It's- It's complicated. You're a *kid*." Jason says, his voice harrowed. He picks his head up to look him in the eyes, and it's the most serious Peter has seen him. "Just- tell me that Tony isn't the reason?"

Peter doesn't understand, but it sounds like this is *super* important to him. Like the idea that Tony could be the reason Peter is Spider-Man makes him sick to his stomach. Peter's mind flashes with the *Robin List* he had read about, what felt like years ago, and how some of the Robins had short tenures. Like the second Robin, who had only four or five years before disappearing.

It had been a lot to process, the day he got here, so it was enough at the time to try and remember their names. But now, Peter wonders if there's something more to the Robins and Batman that has Jason so worried. Did they lose someone?

He knows that a lot of people don't like the idea of kids as vigilantes or superheroes, but Peter hasn't been a kid in a very, very long time. Peter can't imagine himself putting down the mask, because Spider-Man helps people. That's all Peter has ever wanted: to do right by Uncle Ben and Aunt May, and what they taught him.

"He's not." Peter says it like it's a promise. "Not at all. I was bitten by a spider when I was twelve. I met Tony when I was thirteen. Tony doesn't even know a lot about it, just that it happened. I became Spider-Man on my own because I wanted to help people like I hadn't been able to help others that I cared about. I'm trying to follow what my Uncle Ben taught

me. I have the ability to help others with these powers that I have, and what kind of person would I become if I didn't choose to do that?"

"And how does Tony feel about it?"

"He'd like it if I stopped. But he doesn't try to stop me because he knows that I'd just keep doing it anyway. I'm sorry," Peter just can't seem to get it in his mind what the hell Jason could be on about. "-did you guys think Tony was making me-?"

hello! hi friend!

Peter cuts himself off, glancing at the door. Jason does too, but he quirks a brow when he doesn't see anyone. "You alright?"

The door swings open as an answer. Tim is leaning on one crutch, phone in hand. He observes the two of them for a second before nodding to Jason. "Hey, B wants us downstairs for something real quick before dinner."

Jason hesitates, mouth open like he wants to say something, but he decides against it. He grunts as he pushes himself out of the chair. Like his brother, he reaches over to mess with Peter's hair as a way to say goodbye. Peter is about to protest, because hello? Jason can't just leave without at least clarifying what they were thinking? Why does it feel like Peter is the one who wants to have this conversation now, and they don't?

But Jason tells him, "Your Uncle Ben sounds like a good guy." And the protests fall silent.

He does glare at the door, however, when it shuts and he's alone again.

They bring him all the way here but then don't want to talk to him? It sounds so stupid that it can't be the case. It feels like he's out of the loop, and boy, does Peter *hate* being out of the loop. That bug inside his brain that refuses to let adults have all the say in what he does and where he goes and who he goes with and *what he's allowed to know* is screaming at him right now that he needs to figure it out. What happened while he was asleep that made them hold back on this conversation?

He looks down at the lunch tray in his lap. Jason and Tim are keeping something from him, he hasn't seen any of the others. Dick is 'filling out paperwork' which sounds like an excuse to hide something that he's *really* doing. Is it because he's a teenager? Or they think he can't handle it? Is it because he passed out? He's not a damn baby, he can handle the hard shit.

He can't help but think that if Damian were here, he'd at least be honest with Peter.

And then he thinks: *If I were talking to Damian.*

...He's *at* Damian's house.

Peter's own brilliance strikes him sometimes. He can be so stupid one second and startlingly bright the next. He pulls back the heavy covers off of him and slips out of the bed. If he wants to talk to Damian, it looks like he's going to have to find him.

-

“How in the world are you going to break it to Wally that you stole a kid?”

“I didn’t *steal* Peter.” Dick defends himself immediately, because hello?? He thought they were on the same page on this one, and Duke is being so rude right now. “I don’t steal kids. It’s like a rehoming.”

“Don’t say it like *that*. I’d prefer if you stole him.”

“I didn’t steal him!”

“Yeah, Duke,” Steph spins idly in her chair across from Dick as he continues signing his name. “It’s not stealing if it belongs to you.”

Dick raises a brow, but Stephanie doesn’t elaborate what she meant. He shakes his head and looks back down at the adoption papers in front of him. He still has half of a packet to get through, and this is just for the paperwork that *they* have. He still will have an entire process of paperwork to get through to *legally* get Peter as his, once the DNA test is done and they can finally figure out where the kid came from. Peter being honest with them once he wakes up would also be nice.

Not that Dick is complaining. This is exactly what he wanted in the first place. But it’s confusing that Bruce hadn’t suggested anything but supporting Dick, instead of throwing out there about Dick not being ready to be a parent, or whatever other nonsense he could figure out so that he’d be able to adopt Peter instead.

In fact, Bruce has been *worryingly* laid-back about this.

It’s eating away at Dick and making it hard to focus. Because Dick has never, not once, seen Bruce be ‘laid-back’ about something this important. He’s not even hovering over Dick’s shoulder to see him do the paperwork and point out something he should be reading but he skimmed over. Bruce is sitting next to Tim and talking to him while they both look at the Batcomputer screen together, in low, hushed voice that make Dick think that he should be over there with them. Right now, the computer is sequencing Peter’s DNA in every database they have, and they’re all waiting for the results with a sort of tension in the Cave that feels like waiting for a gavel to drop.

Dick looks back at the papers. The papers look up at him. The words swim in his vision, and he closes his eyes for a brief moment. He’s been up long enough that his brain feels like mush at this point.

Whatever they find, he just hopes that Peter is *okay* with this- the adoption. Or, not an *adoption*, adoption, at the moment. It’s the process of starting that.

Because, well, depending on how long Peter is with them, as Waynes, the public will find out eventually. And they’re going to need a story. Dick is more than sure that he wants to be the one taking care of Peter, but what if *Peter* isn’t okay with that?

Peter loves Tony, even if they're all very sure that Tony doesn't love Peter. They still don't even know if Tony is his foster dad or... *God*, don't get him started on the possible 'Tony is a God' thing. The first thing Tim said when he woke up and saw Dick earlier was "*By the way*" and it never comes with anything good, if Tim is starting off a sentence like that. Because it means he found something and he hadn't told you yet.

Tony? A God? Dick doesn't even know where to begin on that. He doesn't think that Tony being a God makes any more sense of the situation. All he knows is that Tony doesn't need to have anything to do with the kid, and even if it makes Dick the bad guy in Peter's eyes, Peter is *not* going back to that shitbag.

But yeah... He knows it's probably wrong to even start filling out the paperwork without talking to Peter and asking him if that's okay, but they *do* need to start on it. He just won't finish or turn anything in until he gets a chance to ask Peter if that's alright.

(The being adopted by Dick thing. Dick thinks that if he heard Peter doesn't want him to be in his life like that, it'd be the equivalent of getting hit by a high speed Batmobile. But if that's the case, Dick will get up on broken bones and personally pick out a number of options for Peter to find a home with. Because Tony *is not home*.)

God, and he needs to tell *Wally*.

Duke pointed it out, as if Dick hadn't been fretting about it on his own, the weight growing heavier every time he writes his signature down.

It's not that Wally and Dick are *together*; together. They haven't had that conversation yet, they were just trying to let it develop naturally. Dick is... flighty, nowadays, when it comes to relationships, because of... just. Everything. He hadn't tried for a relationship in a *long* while, now, because the idea of someone getting that close again made his skin burn. But Wally is *Wally*, and this is something neither of them considered until they were both drunk at Dick's house and talking about how much they cared about each other, and Dick was dealing with the aftermath of being Batman while Bruce was gone and-

Yeah.

They sort of starting drifting towards each other in a way that was *way* more than friends (but honestly, hadn't felt *that* different from how they were before, and that's a little scary to think about). And of course, his family noticed before Dick and Wally could really talk about it again. Of course, they were gonna ask about this, about how Wally might fit into this picture.

They just don't know that Wally has been so busy lately back home these last two months that he and Dick haven't spoken much since then. Sure, they send messages to each other and they make sure the other is alive and doing okay despite the workload increasing, but other than that, it's been hard to pick up the phone. Dick too, has felt like he's carrying too much on his shoulders in both Bludhaven and Gotham, and now he's imagining telling Wally that in the time they haven't been able to catch up, he acquired a *kid* and started looking for a house.

It's a lot to process. It's a lot to think about telling Wally when they only just started considering a real relationship. It's a lot to think about a house where Wally and Dick and Damian and Peter live together like some kind of movie, because it's that surreal to think Dick could be that happy.

But... In the end, Dick knows that Peter needs someone, and if that puts everything else on hold, he'll be fine with it. He'd make that decision a hundred times over if he had to.

Dick looks back over at the computer, trying to focus on the papers but finding it to be increasingly difficult. Not just because Steph is watching him fill the papers out like she's a hawk ready to swoop in with a joke and Duke is playing a video game next to him and the beeping is starting to get to him, but also because he *knows* something is up.

Jason and Babs have been skirting around an idea they had about Peter. Tim wouldn't talk to him about his thoughts on Bruce and Peter after the Two-Face incident, and he had that *look* in his eye like he had something figured out. Bruce gave up too easily.

Bruce gave up too easily.

It's that part that hits him the most. He just keeps returning to the moment where Damian had been resting on Dick's shoulder at the breakfast table, half asleep, and Bruce had been the one to bring up getting the papers for Dick.

Why? Kept spinning around his head as he watched Bruce sip his coffee. *Why did you do that?*

Dick knows when he's being kept out of the loop. It's had him stepping back to see the entirety of Peter's case, to figure out what he could be missing that everyone else saw. At first, he thought it was Peter being Spider-Man. But now?

He knows how close he's getting to the answer. It sits there at the edge of his mind, waiting for him to pick it up and examine it. He doesn't know if he *wants* to think it, to accept it, in case it happens to be the wrong idea. But... He keeps going back to it, dancing on the edge precariously.

Last night had been a mix of frantic panic and a silence that hung over the Manor.

When Peter passed out, they brought him back to the Cave and Alfred declared that only Dick could be in the room. The others *had* to go get their own injuries checked out by each other or go see Leslie, and no one argues with Alfred. The worry they had for Peter was subdued when Alfred closed the curtains and got to work. When Peter was properly assessed as 'fine and needing rest' they set him up in the room that they had decided would be Peter's.

Alfred had ordered the rest of them to get some rest. Again: no one argues with Alfred. Tim had been exhausted and given pain medication for his broken foot, so he actually did pass out. Bruce had tried to stay up to talk to Dick, but he was injured and he didn't have the heart to protest when *Jason* pulled the 'Old Man' nickname out.

It meant that no one had the opportunity to test Peter's DNA, and so the Manor was quiet. For some reason, it reminded Dick of the period of his life when Bruce had taken him in. Dick stayed in the chair next to Peter's bed, the clock ticking out in the hall and Peter breathing softly in his sleep.

He couldn't stop thinking about what he was missing.

Every glimpse he had of Peter as Spider-Man, working triage and getting people evacuated, made it clear that Peter had been trained for this, or at least had been doing this for a while. He worked faster than the rest of them, evacuating the most people out of the building. Several of them would have died if Peter hadn't been there to fish them out of the rubble and get them to someone. But no matter how efficient Peter or Tim or Damian or *any* of the others are, Dick will always feel a gripping fear when he hears they've gotten hurt.

He felt that fear when he heard Peter and Tim were injured in the attack. Of *course* Peter had also been the type to keep going despite that. Dick had felt useless in that moment, when he pulled the destroyed building apart to get to them. It was all Dick could do to help Peter put the building down, to be there and take care of him in the aftermath.

The fear hadn't gone away like he hoped it would, not until he was sitting by Peter's side while the kid was *fine* and asleep (just asleep, it's not like what happened to Jason, because Dick was *there* and Peter is *okay*).

When the fear wore off, Dick couldn't stop thinking about how Peter looked *so much* like him when he wore that domino mask.

It struck him so violently, that thought, and he's still struggling to let it go now. It could mean nothing, it could just be a similarity. (Peter has Dick's mother's eyes. He has her eyes and is it in the same way that Peter's smile looks like his?) But at the same time, coincidences don't play nice in Gotham. A coincidence always turns out to be something more, something hard to hold onto in the struggle. This thought is dangerously close to what Dick thinks the others were trying not to let him know. It explains why everyone is in the Cave together, hovering around him in particular, and not off doing their own things.

It's not stealing if it belongs to you.

Please, please, *please* don't let this be what Dick thinks it is.

Jason sets down a mug of coffee next to him. The clink of the cup on the glass catches his attention, and Dick tears his eyes away from the computer to look at his little brother. Jason avoids his gaze as he takes the seat next to Dick.

"Kid asked about you."

The guilt feels like a slap in the face. He'd wanted to be there when Peter woke up, because he feels shitty that Peter didn't get a choice to come with them after all that work they put in to *give* him that choice. There's a reason Tim wasn't allowed to go to Peter's room at Benny's and try to find DNA- Dick trying to teach them boundaries, and he had a feeling the kid would 100% know if someone went snooping around his room.

(He knows Tim tried anyway. Malicious compliance that is Dick's fault. He said 'don't go snooping in Peter's room to get the DNA.' Instead, Tim tried to get it at Batburger, but Peter took his trash with him.)

Steph rolls her eyes at him. "Don't make the saddest face in the world over that. He's *literally* fine. You'll see him before dinner, I bet."

Jason grunts, which isn't a good sign at all. "You look like Peter is not fine." Dick points out.

"He *is*. He's eating, he has a joke with Alfie already, all you can ask for in a healthy, fine kid."

"What did he say? You know what, never mind." Dick stands up from his seat. "I'll just go ask him. I should have been up there anyway. You said he's eating? Do you think he's still hungry? I have snacks he might like- don't tell Alfie."

"Dickhead, maybe finish up your paperwork? I told him you'd come see him when you're done." Jason taps the papers. Dick bites down a protest. He wants to go see Peter *now*, not wait to finish up paperwork he could do later. The kid asked about him, he should be there! What if he feels bad that Dick isn't there with him?

But Jason shoots him another look, probably a reminder that Dick needs to be down here, because Jason might be chill with B at the moment, but Peter is a point of contention after Bruce's stunt, and Dick *needs* to know what they know. It's a lot for one look, but they're experts at reading each other by now. So instead of leaving, Dick sits back down in his chair and starts signing a little too aggressively on the paper.

"Is the DNA sequence almost done?" Duke asks, still focused on his video game.

"Hey, Boyfie!" Steph shouts suddenly, startling the table. Dick's signature on this page comes out wobbly. "What's it at now?"

"95%." Tim replies from over his shoulder. "Some of the readings are already processed. Does anyone want to guess how radioactive he is?"

scratch!

Dick's signature stops midway, a line chopping through the words above it. Jason winces. Dick's eyes snap up to look at Tim. "*What* did you just say?"

"Oh, boy, I love this game!" Steph hums, tapping a finger on her chin. "Humans have about 7,400 becquerels, right?"

"We are not playing this game!" Dick stands up from the table and makes his way over to the computer. He leans over Tim's shoulder, the other boy pulls back to give Dick a better view of the screen, covering his mouth with one hand awkwardly.

It's the usual testing that they do for everyone. From what Dick can see, there's not a lot to be worried about at the moment. He has decreased nutrient levels that no doubt, Alfred already spotted and is working on creating a meal plan for. But it *is* concerning to see that Peter

appears to be slightly more radioactive than the typical person. He supposes that it's not a harmful amount, but still, *weird*.

"The spider that bit him must have been radioactive." Tim says, massaging his right hand while deep in thought. He and Bruce are looking at another screen above the one Dick is looking at. "But look at the genetic mutation in this sequence. There's spider DNA *embedded* into his. There's probably more to his powers than we've gotten to see."

"I thought the whole 'Spider-Man' thing cleared that up." Steph comments. "Spider. Man. Sounds pretty simple."

"He's definitely not a meta. He doesn't have the gene." Bruce sighs, leaning back into his chair. He looks exhausted, unable to look away from the data. "I'm worried about *where* he received the mutation."

"Do we think someone experimented on him?" Tim asks.

God, *experimentation*. With all the shit that Dick sees, he wonders if there's ever going to be a time that he actually gets ambivalent to hearing something like that. A part of him doesn't want to feel that ache of never-ending sorrow for others, but a bigger part of him doesn't want to lose it, and is maybe terrified that the day could come. The idea that someone could have done something like that to Peter makes his blood *boil*-

"Do we think Tony did it?" Steph asks. The reminder of Tony's existence sparks a bigger frustration in his chest, and before he can comment on if that is the case, he'll definitely make Tony regret it, Jason speaks up.

"No, we don't."

Everyone looks at him, surprised. Jason has his arms crossed, head leaned back to look at the cave ceiling. He's not angry, but he too looks *tired*.

"We don't?" Tim raises a brow, asking for the clarification without asking.

"I asked him." Jason says, and Dick hats that he tenses up, just a little. It's hard knowing that shit like this triggers Jason, but they can't do anything about it. Jason, for his part, doesn't act like he's pissed about the world or at Bruce, which is relief. "He told me Tony had nothing to do with it, they met after he got bit."

"And when was that?" Bruce asks.

"He said he was twelve when it happened, and he met Tony when he was thirteen."

"Wait, are we talking about Tony now?" Steph cuts in. "Because I still don't believe that Tony is a God *and* Peter's foster dad. Ugh, can we just bring Peter down here already so we can *ask* him?"

Honestly, Dick agrees. They could speculate all they want, but they'll only know the truth when Peter tells them. The kid is awake and might be willing to talk, so he knows that's what they need to do. But then his mind flashes with the look of Peter in that domino, and again

how everyone seems to suspect something but won't tell *him*, and how Bruce had given up just a little too fast... His mind circles back to that thought that he's scared to pick up.

The computer alerts to a finished process.

Tim and Bruce look first. Dick tries to look, but his body is frozen. It's not until Tim sucks in a breath and says, "Shit." that Dick gets the courage to look at the screen, where the DNA results are waiting for him.

PETER 'GRAYSON'

UNKNOWN MATCHES TO ANY RECORDS

POSSIBILITY OF PARENTAGE:

Richard John Grayson- 99.999%

Alessandra Martina Romano-Esposito- 99.999%

It's not stealing if it belongs to you.

-

Wayne Manor is weird as shit.

Peter stares at the wall in front of him, offended by it's mere existence. He's on the third floor now, and at this point, he has concluded that Wayne Manor isn't just *difficult* to navigate, but it's also full of secrets that he so wants to uncover.

His Not-His-Room had been on the second floor, and that's where it appears everyone else has their bedrooms as well. When Peter had walked out, he had not been met with a hallway like expected, but a *sitting room*. He should iterate that he seriously thought those didn't actually exist. The sitting room was connected to two mystery bedrooms like his own- Peter had knocked on a few of the doors down there, but he hadn't gone snooping through them, or anything.

When he left that sitting room, he had discovered that he was right to assume that the Wayne's are like, *rich* rich. He walked out onto a balcony that opened up to look over a huge grand hall. It made everything feel open but also closed off, because there are *so. Many. Doors*. Like, an absurd amount. In this one square shaped section of the second floor, there was a lot to even look for.

There were staircases to his immediate left that went either up towards where he thinks are the master bedrooms, or down to the Hall. But instead of going downstairs, he first went to investigate if anyone was in the other bedrooms or sitting rooms. There are two more sitting rooms, that lead to three bedrooms that connect to them, just like the room Peter had been in. All of them were empty.

One of the doors had been open and looked right into what he thinks is Coupon's sitting room, because there was the scraps of a robot on the ground. One door in that shared sitting

room had yellow sign with Duke's name on it, and the third had a poster of some rock band he's never heard of. The room with the radio going had been leading down to a hallway full of spare bedrooms, and it sort of smelled like there were guns nearby, so he thinks it could be Jason's?

There was a locked bedroom door in one of the sitting rooms, and his spider-sense told him it hadn't been touched in a *long* time. There was nothing to tell Peter that anyone was around, so he decided to continue his search by choosing to go up the stairs, past the master bedrooms, and to the third floor. His spider-sense had told him that there was some kind of movement up there.

Which leads to now.

He's gone through most of the third floor, and he's starting to get pissed off. Because he *knows* he can hear a hollowness to the walls in some places that scream "secret room" and Peter is entirely forgetting what he was doing because of it.

It's a secret fucking room! Hello?? Who the hell cares about answering their dumb questions when there's secret passages everywhere? Peter is half expecting to find a library, pull down a specific book, and find the entrance to the secret room that way. All he keeps coming across are music rooms or what look like old offices, or empty rooms that no one has touched in a while.

"Meow?"

"I know it's here." Peter says. The black and white tuxedo cat that Peter found chilling on a window a few minutes ago sits next to him, his tail flicking with idle curiosity. It's been following him around since then.

Peter crouches down to the ground to look the cat in the eyes. "You wouldn't happen to know if there's a vase I gotta pick up to get inside that passage, right?"

"Meow."

"Hm." Peter nods. "Alright, keep your secrets. I'll figure it out soon enough."

The cat does not say anything back this time.

"They don't call me Spider-Detective for nothing." Peter stands back up. He rubs his chin like they do in the movies, and in his mind he has one of those dorky hats and a big coat on. "Well, no one calls me that. But they would if I had a magnifying glass."

"Meow."

"You get it."

He rubs his hands together as he makes his way down the hall, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious looking. Oh, and for Damian. He almost forgot about that part. The cat slinks along next to him, rubbing on the legs of fancy wooden tables with probably-super-expensive-and-fragile antiques on them.

It's weird that a whole bunch of people live in this house (he thinks) and he hasn't seen anyone but this cat around since earlier. Maybe he should have just gone after Jason and Tim and demanded to be involved. But that felt like whining, and Peter doesn't do shit like that.

He opens one of the big doors to peek inside one room, and he pauses.

It's a dancing studio. On the other side from the door, there are floor to ceiling windows, the afternoon light spilling in. To the right there is a wall of mirrors, and all around the room are support bars about waist-high. It's empty, save for a water bottle that has condensation, and someone's phone. The cat walks over to the bottle and licks some of the water drops.

"Meow."

"You're right, Cat Watson." Peter says. "Someone's been here recently."

He steps into the room, looking around another time. He might as well just wait for them to come back. No one leaves their phone somewhere if they aren't gonna come back soon to get it. The cat seems to get the idea that they're chilling in here, because he flops onto Peter's feet and gives him an expectant look.

"Aw, who's the cutest little guy ever?" Peter coos, scratching at the cat's chin. The cat closes his eyes and starts to purr. "You're so sweet. Nothing like my nemesis, Sprinkles."

The cat purrs as Peter sits down fully on the ground. The cat apparently likes when Peter uses both hands to manhandle his face, cause it keeps shoving itself forward for Peter to do it again. He pulls back his hands to squish him a little, snorting at the face he's making.

"That cat hates me. I didn't even do anything wrong. I save him from a tree pretty much every Thursday because I can't say no to his owner. She's a little girl named Amanda, and I'm not a monster, so of course I say yes every time. Even though Sprinkles is a demon from hell and has earned his right to be an outdoor, feral cat."

The cat doesn't care about Peter's ramblings. He climbs over Peter's lap, meowing loudly when Peter stops to brush his own hair out of his face.

"Demanding little guy, aren't you?" Peter continues petting. The cat is content with that, and he is pretty damn cute, so he supposes he'll just have to die here if that's what it wants.

hello!

Peter looks up at the door, only to find someone standing a couple feet away.

He freezes. The cat protests this, pushing its head into Peter's hand. He tries to pet like normal, but he's so surprised that he forgets how to move his hands. The woman that entered the room has the bottle and the phone in her hands, head tilted to the side as she observes Peter with a grin on her lips.

She's an Asian woman in her mid-twenties, maybe, and very pretty. Her black hair is cut very short, held out of her face by two strawberry clips on either side. She's wearing practice clothes, which makes sense if she's a dancer. This isn't what catches his attention, however.

Peter's sense being as fine tuned as they are, he catches onto body language that a lot of people don't notice. Like when someone lies, and their pupils dilate. Or when someone's smile is too thin to be real. Sometimes he notices calluses on people's hands that show how hard they work daily, sometimes he sees people who have chronic pain and need someone to help them. With this woman, he sees someone talking to him. Studying *him* just as intently.

The tilt of her head is the curiosity, the smile is her warm greeting. The way her eyes twinkle with knowing, and how precise her steps are when she makes her way over to sit next to him without a word. His spider sense buzzes around her, not because she's dangerous to him, but because she is not someone to mess with.

He can't help but tense up because of it. When Peter meets someone who could kick his ass, a lot of the time, the instinct is to fight. Other times, when he knows he wouldn't win, it's to get away as fast as he can. Right now, he wants to run.

She holds out her hand to him, a slow movement, with her palm up. Her posture is relaxed, neither leaning toward him nor away. She's open, showing him that she's not going to hurt him. It's exactly like she knows Peter's spider-instinct wants him to get the hell out of dodge.

Peter looks at her hand, hesitant. She doesn't try to pressure him, just waiting for an answer. He lifts his left hand to hers, and she holds his hand with a gentle squeeze, her smile growing. *Happy*, in a way that feels like she's been hoping for that.

"I'm Cassandra. I go by Cass." She introduces herself. Her voice is so soft.

"Peter." He replies. "You're Black Bat, aren't you?"

Another smile. She squeezes his hand again, and when Peter lets go, she reaches down to pet the cat. "Yes, I am. And you're Spider-Man."

"It's nice to meet you." Peter tells her. "But it does feel like I'm meeting a ghost."

This makes her laugh. She hums in thought as the cat pushes his head against her hand. "Not many know when I am around. But you did."

"Only for a second. And only 'cause you wanted me to." He watches her face. He's never met anybody who can talk like she does. It's weird, but fascinating.

"You didn't like it when Bruce did it." Cass points out, far too amused by this. "But you are not angry with me."

She says it as a statement, because she *knows*. She knows just by looking at him what he feels. Peter shakes his head, a chuckle escaping him. "Something about Mr. Wayne makes me feel like a rebellious teenager."

hello! friend!

"Cassandra, have you seen Alfred?" Damian's sharp voice cuts in as he hurriedly enters the room. He stops a few feet away when he sees Peter, then puts his hands on his hips as he scowls. "Aren't you supposed to be resting?"

“I went looking for my favorite Robin!” Peter grins cheekily, and Damian rolls his eyes.

“What could you possibly want right now?”

“Well, firstly, and more importantly, I wanna know about the secret passages in the wall. Cat Watson was helpful, but we only got so far.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mmmm.... What did I say that needs repeating?” Peter squints.

“His name is Alfred.”

“...The butler?” Peter looks around the room, as if he wouldn’t know if the butler was around.

“The cat. His name is Alfred the Cat.” Damian states as if that makes *any* sense.

“I bet Alfred the Human was thrilled.” Peter comments. Damian stares at Alfred the Cat, who is trying to crawl back into Peter’s lap.

“He likes you.”

“I’m a very likeable guy. Or so my Aunt said.” Peter shrugs.

“Hm. Acceptable.” Damian waves it off, then asks, “What was your second thought for me?”

“Oh yeah. I wanted to know why everyone is being weird.” Peter looks at him. Cass leans back to watch him, and Peter tries to understand what she means when she raises her eyebrow like that. *Knowing*, is what it feels like, but not much else. “Tim and Jason both visited me on my death bed-”

“You were not dying.”

“-and neither of them asked me any questions. Which is weird, because you guys were all about that before.”

“Father and the others are waiting for the results of your DNA test. You’ve lied to everyone before, so we wanted to have our own information before talking to you.” Damian states, simple and clear cut, leaving no room for misinterpretation. It’s just like Peter expected.

Well... He *did* lie to them. He can’t be upset that they’d want that information.

But his gut gets all twisty anyway.

So the paperwork was probably the DNA test, right? And them watching over him while he slept and stuff, was it to make sure he didn’t run off, or maybe to make sure he didn’t hurt any of them? He might have jumped the gun with calling them friends, since they have been friendly to him the whole time. But then again, people can be friendly and have different intentions.

The scar on his neck feels cold and too exposed.

He doesn't think they're bad guys. They're just doing their jobs, aren't they? Making sure Peter isn't a threat to them or anyone else by getting to know him, and they're also investigating Peter and Ohnn both. They can be friendly while also getting what they need.

Peter grins, knowing that Cass is watching him, but not really knowing what else to do but get over it. "Sounds about right. Are they almost done, or is that an after dinner conversation?"

"I have no idea. The others are cooped up in the Cave, and I had to feed Alfred."

"See, I keep picturing the *guy* when you say his name."

"*Meow.*"

"Alfred the Cat agrees with me." Peter says.

"How would *you* know what he's saying? You don't speak cat."

"What if I do?"

"You're a spider-mutant, not a cat mutant. If you can also speak to animals, then I call bullshit." Damian snipes. He crouches down to call Alfred the Cat over to him, but the cat remains lazily in Peter's lap. Cassandra giggles at Damian's face. But a question that Peter had a long time ago hits him all at once, and he cuts off Damian's complaint.

"Wait, do you have turkeys?"

Damian's eyes widen and he's taken aback. Cassandra laughs again, this time louder. "How in the heaven's name did you know that?"

"Please show me the turkeys!" Peter puts his hands together as he begs. "I've been wondering about this for, like, ages!"

"How did you know I have a turkey?"

"Pleaaaaaase! I've never seen a turkey in person before!"

"Peter, how did you know I have a turkey!?"

-

"Who the hell is Alessandra!?"

"Holy shit, dude, I thought it was weird that he looked like you but this is insane."

"Looked *like* him? Peter has his face! Just color Dick's eyes and hair in brown and boom, you got Peter! Dimples and all!"

"Wait, he *does* look like Dick."

“Duke, are you serious? I thought we all knew this and just weren’t saying it out loud.”

“You all look the same to me.”

“Wait wait wait! Tim stop! Look at that!”

“Steph stop pulling my hair when you want to see something on the damn computer!”

“Then maybe *listen* when I tell you to wait!”

“Dick, do you recognize her?”

“She’s soooo *pretty*! Oh my gosh, look at this picture! She’s a firefighter! Look at her muscles! She could crack someone’s head open! I need to meet her immediately.”

“This tracks with Dick’s record.”

“Honestly, true. I mean, like, Kori and Babs?”

“But she’s not a red head!”

“She looks *so* much like Peter!”

“This is literally just a normal mother from Gotham. Look, she has a toddler named Teresa, she drives a white soccer van with a hundred bumper stickers, she goes to local coffee shops-”

“How are you finding this so fast?”

“I’m good at my job? Why are you complaining?”

“Tim stop!”

“OW! Steph, *stop* pulling my hair!”

“Looooook! Awwwwww, that is the *cutest* baby I’ve ever seen! Gasp, wait-”

“Did you just say gasp out loud?”

“-Do you think that’s what Peter looked like as a baby? She looks a lot like her mom too! Do we have a picture of Peter yet? I wanna compare faces!”

“She volunteers at several local animal shelters on weekends, and she also works at her family’s community center.”

“Jesus, she’s a saint or something. Look at this picture? Is she building a wheelchair for a paralyzed dog?”

“Dick,” Jason cuts through the chatter. Dick can’t feel his face. Or his hands. Or his body, in general. He knows that Jason is touching his shoulder, but it doesn’t feel that, either. Jason’s

voice is low, meant only for Dick to hear. He looks at Jason on autopilot, because he certainly hadn't thought about moving.

His brows are furrowed in understanding, and he pulls Dick along gently. "Let's get you somewhere quiet for a little bit."

Dick thinks that's nice. He wanted to do that, but along with not feeling his body, he can't comprehend moving on his own. Jason leads him away from the computer, Bruce's eyes following them as the kids bicker about what they're seeing. Jason closes the door behind them when they get to the med bay. Dick walks to the nearest wall and puts his back to it, sliding down to the ground.

Jason meets him there. They both sit together, shoulder to shoulder, in silence. Dick can't bring his mouth to move just yet.

Peter is his kid.

He wants to say that it came out of nowhere, but did it really? All this time, Dick felt like *something* was wrong- not wrong, no, not... Not wrong. It was just that ever since he met Peter, Dick couldn't sleep like he used to. He wanted to be out there with everyone, or at least be there for Peter, somehow. When they were apart, his mind kept drifting back to the snarky and clever kid, wondering how he was.

And he knew, to some extent, that Peter looked similar to him. He noticed from the very start that Peter had Dick's mother's eyes, but he hadn't thought he *had* his mother's eyes. Not like that. He thought that Peter was just the universe throwing him into Bruce's steps yet again. *There's a kid that looks like you. That reminds you of you. That needs someone.*

Peter is *his* kid.

His dimples on that kid's face. His mother's eyes. That's his nose, isn't it? Did he sound like Dick did at that age?

How did this *happen*? How would Dick not know? There can't be any way that Dick would forget someone he'd been with to this extent. He would have been 15, he wasn't doing anything at 15. But with this line of work, what if someone-

Oh, god, what if someone cloned him? The possible experimentation, that could be a part of it. He doesn't remember his parents, he's told Dick that before. He has memories of his life with people that raised him, and it doesn't make any sense right now. The image of a little toddler Peter not knowing his parents, in some lab somewhere, being raised by people who hurt him like that-

"Hey, Big Wing, you gotta breathe."

Dick lets out a gasping breath.

Peter is his kid.

“How did this happen?” Dick’s voice cracks, and he looks at Jason for an answer. Not even an answer- he’s just- he’s feeling so lost, so *guilty*, and he needs something to hold onto or he’s never going to understand.

Jason’s face softens. He’s holding onto Dick’s wrist, feeling the pulse there. “I don’t know.”

No matter how Peter got here, it’s Dick’s fault somehow. It has to be. Whether he’s a clone, or there’s another possible explanation, Peter is *his*, and Dick is the reason that he exists. It’s a terrifying concept, one that threatens to pull Dick over the side and drown him.

“I don’t even know an Alessandra.”

“I didn’t think you would.” Jason agrees.

“I would have been fifteen.”

“I know.”

“Did I do this to him?”

“Don’t you dare.” Jason urges, squeezing his wrist. “Look at me, Dick. It’s not your fault.”

“Then who’s is it?” His mind keeps coming back to a lab where Peter is *all alone* and Dick hadn’t been there. “We need to talk to Alessandra.”

“*Maybe.*” Jason says, and Dick thinks he’s gone crazy. Because why wouldn’t they go to her right now and get some kind of explanation as to how she had a kid with someone that doesn’t even remember her? Jason scoffs at Dick’s expression, shaking his head. “We still have to talk to Peter. We have a shit ton to ask him, alright? There’s gonna be answers in there, you can’t go running off to investigate that right now. The kid’s gonna need you here, you can’t leave him with just Bruce to talk to. I have a feeling the kid takes after you in the teenage angst department. He stole his cape for jump scaring him, how do you think it’ll go if they have a serious conversation without you here?”

That startles a laugh out of Dick. The image of Peter shrouded in Batman’s cape while mocking him makes some of that panic fall away.

Dick puts his head in his hands, elbows on his knees, and lets out a sigh that he hopes will carry away the rest of the fear and the mind-numbing feeling that comes with it. Jason’s completely right. He can’t go running off to investigate without talking to Peter, his biggest lead, first. And his *kid*.

His kid. When he’s not freaking the hell out about it, it feels nice to hear that.

Peter would have been his if he accepted the adoption, but this hits in a different way. This is a blood relation, something that doesn’t go away no matter how hard someone could try. Dick keeps looking back on all of their interactions and trying to figure out what other details he could have missed, because he hadn’t been looking. Does Peter laugh the same way he does?

He recalls the night he first met Spider-Man. Peter caught him when his grappling hook gave out, and Dick had *already* thought back on that interaction fondly after figuring out that Peter is Spider-Man. But this time, it makes his chest feel warm to remember that he figured out Peter had been watching him before then, too, because Cass sent that video of him copying those flips. Maybe Peter is a lot more like him than he realized.

Oh god.

“What?” Jason asks when Dick sits up fast.

“Peter doesn’t know.”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Jason.” Dick presses. “He doesn’t know.”

“I figured? If he knew and hadn’t reacted, he’s a damn good liar. And I don’t think he is, to be honest. Unless he thinks it’s funny, because of that library shit he pulled-”

“Jason, how the *hell* do we tell him?”

Jason pauses. “Oh.”

“I can’t just go, ‘Okay, tell me everything about your life. By the way, I’m your *supposedly* dead father. Don’t know who told you that.’”

“I mean... that sort of sounds like what you should say? I’d put it nicer, though. But that’s just me.”

Dick groans, the newfound problem swinging overhead, ready to cut his head off like a guillotine. He’s never thought about a situation like this. All of the contingency plans that he has in place for events like his friends getting mind controlled and trying to kill him and him knowing all of their weaknesses, or what to do in case, say, a giant octopus tries to take over Gotham... and he never planned for a surprise son?

“Do you think there’s a reddit post somewhere about this kind of situation?”

“Wow, scraping the bottom of the barrel here for a solution.”

“Unless you have helpful advice, you don’t get to judge me on how I handle telling my son I’m his father.” Dick snarks as he opens his phone. He’s about to open Abacus when he sees that he has a missed call from Wally. “Oh shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I gotta call Wally.”

“Oh shit.” Jason laughs, because he’s a bastard and finds amusement in Dick’s suffering. He claps Dick on the shoulder and stands up. “Good luck with that. I’m gonna go see what they found out about that Alessandra woman.”

He pauses, glancing at his little brother. "Little Wing."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Dick can still hear the others talking to each other, though it's muffled by the door to the med bay. He'd probably still be there or would have had a panic attack if Jason hadn't brought him away from that.

Jason grins softly. "Don't mention it. Seriously. Don't. We're not good with mushy feelings."

He laughs, thumb hovering over the 'call back' button as Jason leaves.

It's been two months since they properly talked to each other, and he can't imagine what to even say. First, it was a problem on how to tell his friend-maybe-lover about gaining a kid, but... He just needs Wally's advice. Or just to talk about it. No, what he *wants* is to be with Wally right now and have the conversation in person, but he shouldn't leave until he talks to Peter, at least, and if he asks Wally to come get him, he's going to want to stay with Wally or go investigate Alessandra.

He needs to at least hear Wally's voice. So he clicks call.

"Dick?" Wally answers halfway through the first ring. *"Hey! Man, that was fast. I thought you wouldn't get to call me back until later."*

"I had my phone on me and saw you called. How've you been?"

"Masters program is kicking my ass." Wally laughs, and Dick closes his eyes. It's been way too long since he's heard his voice. *"My professor has some kind of hatred for fun and joy or whatever, so he keeps making my assignments due at 3PM, like a psycho."*

"Who picks 3PM for a due date?"

"That's what I'm saying!" It sounds like Wally has flopped onto his bed. *"Hey, are you free right now? I can zip on over and we can hang out. I've missed you."*

Dick smiles, fondness bubbling up around the ever stirring emotional void that he has going on right now. And then guilt, because he knows that he can't accept having Wally take him somewhere where he doesn't have to think about life. At least, not right now. "Sorry... I'm not. We've got a... situation, here."

There's a moment of hesitation, and then. *"Are you okay? You sound like you've been through the ringer. Want me to kiss it better?"*

"It's just a lot to process." He replies, running a hand through his hair. "It's a lot to explain. You got some time?"

"Of course I do! What's going on? I thought you guys settled the new Arkham breakouts? I saw it on the news."

“Yeah, we did. This is something more personal.” ‘Personal’, he says. Yeah, no shit, Dick. Having a surprise son is about as personal of a matter that something can get.

“You guys fighting again?”

“No, not that kind of personal.” Dick sets his head back on the wall, his stomach a bundle of nerves. “There’s this kid...”

“Bruce did not pick up another kid.” Wally gasps. *“Did he at least tell you this time?”*

“Well, um, it’s... complicated. He’s less of Bruce’s and more of a stray that the rest of us picked up. He kind of showed up out of nowhere at Babs’ library, and it was pretty clear he had some shit going on at home. We were just checking on him at first because it was pretty bad. But, well... he kind of... doesn’t exist.”

“Uh oh?”

“He’s also sort of a vigilante.”

“So he totally got adopted. Got you.”

“Not yet?”

“Why is that a question?” Wally laughs. *“That’s what happens in Gotham. Bruce looks at a kid and boom, they’ve got a room in the Manor. You guys clearly inherited that from him.”*

“He’s staying with us right now-”

“See?”

“-because he got hurt last night while we were fighting Firefly. Honestly, Wally, there’s a lot of shit in between all of this that I don’t know if I could explain over the phone. But we ran his DNA earlier-”

“You guys are such freaks.” Wally says, sounding stupidly fond about it.

“Yeah, I guess we are. It’s just, with all the other stuff going on, we had to check, you know? Because he doesn’t exist anywhere we can find him, and the theories and stuff are all over the place.”

“Well? What’d it say?”

Dick hesitates. “He’s mine.”

“Your what?” Wally doesn’t get it. Dick runs a hand over his mouth.

“He’s my kid, Wally. We don’t- We don’t know *how*, yet, but he is. Bruce ran it another time to be sure, while all the kids were freaking out. And me, too. He’s my son.”

Now that has Wally sitting in stunned silence. It lasts long enough that Dick pulls back his phone to make sure they're still on a call. Dick doesn't know what to say, really. He had been surprised to find out about Kon-El, but being on the other side of that conversation is strange. Maybe he should ask Clark? From what he remembers, Clark and Kon had a very rocky relationship at the start, but they're far better now.

This also happened to Bruce, with Damian. He knows that Bruce is trying to be more open and shit, but he doesn't know if Bruce is ready to talk about his feelings on *that* particular subject. Least of all would he want to say anything to Dick, he thinks.

"You there?"

"What's he like?" Wally asks.

"What?"

"Look, I'm not there right now, and I don't know the facts, so I'm not gonna speculate." Wally tells him, and it's with that Wally conviction that tells Dick there's nothing changing his mind. *"Clone, ex-lover, whatever. Doesn't matter, 'cause I know you're already attached. You are, aren't you? I bet you were filling out adoption papers before you even knew."*

"I didn't fill them out completely."

"Are you absolutely sure you're not related to Bruce? Is the adoption thing genetic?"

"Wally--"

"What's the kid like? What's his name? What do you know about him? I'm not there, you gotta fill me in!"

Dick laughs, a wave of affection washing over him. Okay, so he was probably over thinking again. Wally has a way of pulling him out of his head and back into what really matters. And what matters right now is Peter, and where they go from here. Dick can't stop thinking about his past, and how Peter could have gotten here... He thinks about Kon-El, and how alone he had been, and fears that Peter might have been the same.

"He's super smart, first of all. His code name is Spider-Man, with a hyphen. Both the 'man' and hyphen is very important to him. We haven't really talked about that part yet, but from what we've seen, he's super intelligent, and likes working on the fly. I don't even know if he makes contingency plans like we do, or if he just makes it up on the spot? But he's good with computers, Babs had tried tracing back how he got into the library computers without a login and he erased it. And he's *funny*, too. He likes making people laugh. Well, he hasn't said that, but when he does make someone laugh he gets a goofy smile on his face."

"That last part sounds like you, Boy Wonder." Wally teases, but there's a thoughtful consideration behind it.

"When we were in civvies, we got caught up in Two-Face's plan--"

"The one on the subway?"

“Yeah, that one.” Dick nods even though Wally can’t see him. “He mouthed off to Two-Face and stole his detonator. Gave Tim a run for his money too after that. Gave me a damn near heart attack, but it worked out alright. He’s just- He’s a really good kid. It took a lot to get him to trust us, but I think he does now? We haven’t really gotten a chance to talk about it, everything’s been so hectic.”

“He sounds like a good kid. I can’t wait to meet him.” Wally sounds like he genuinely means it. Relief washes over him, and Dick sighs smally.

“I... I’m just nervous. He doesn’t... *know*.” Dick admits. “He doesn’t know that I’m his father. From the little bit we know about his past, it’s clear he thinks his parents are dead. He grew up with an Aunt May and Uncle Ben, and now he says he’s a foster kid.”

“I thought he didn’t exist? Like, legally? If you guys couldn’t find him... Or, well, really, if even Tim couldn’t find him, then something’s going on, right?”

“Yeah, we don’t know how it matches up, exactly. I mean, the closest theory I can think of is that someone is cloning people again, but it still doesn’t match up. It’s all just- just really complicated. I don’t even know where to begin. He woke up a little bit ago and we’re planning to talk to him about it all, try to get some answers. I just... I don’t know how to tell him. The conversation went from ‘hey, your foster dad who might be a God really sucks and I hate him, so we’re taking him in’ -”

“Whoa whoa whoa, what?”

“-to now, I have to tell him ‘So I know you think your father is dead and all, but I’m about to literally change your perception of your life up until now.’”

“I’m sorry, I’m still hung up on the Godly Foster Parent?”

Dick scoffs. “Don’t even get me *started* on Tony.”

“You could not sound like you hate someone more that you just did.” Wally laughs in surprise. *“Who the hell is Tony?”*

“Peter’s foster parent. We *think*. That’s what Peter calls him, at least, for now. It might just be what Tony told him to say. What I *do* know is that piece of shit has good money, is likely a brilliant engineer, and he dropped Peter off basically homeless and starving in *Gotham* so he could hide away somewhere from some dipshit villain that’s after him, and doesn’t seem to give two-shits about his well being. And- And Peter really cares about him.”

Wally grows quiet for a minute, probably letting all of that sink in. Dick feels the rage boil under his skin at Tony- this shitbag that just *left* Peter to fend for himself, and came back for who-knows-what, then disappeared again without even trying to take care of Peter. It makes no fucking sense and it’s just so *unfair* to Peter. The kid *adores* Tony, he trusts him, and this is the thanks that Peter got? Bruises and beatings from someone that *Tony* pissed off, and Tony couldn’t be bothered to help him?

Dick swallows down some of the guilt that wants to eat him alive. If Peter really was cloned because of him, then what if there was a way he could have known sooner? Would he have been there to keep him safe? Could he have saved Peter? Can he be a good dad *now*?

“Dick, I think it’s gonna turn out alright.” Wally finally says, dragging Dick back to the present. *“Like you said, Peter’s a smart kid. He sounds like a tough one, too. Now that he’s got you and the other Bats in his corner, I’m sure it’s going to work out for the better. He won’t be left behind anymore. Just take it one problem at a time. Kaldur would tell you that, too. Want me to add him to the call?”*

“God, no, don’t bother Kaldur right now.” Dick chuckles. Kaldur is probably just getting back from his own mission for the Justice League tomorrow.

He lets the words sit in his mind, and he really takes his time to consider them, to feel them. For all of his fears and insecurities about this, Wally is right. Peter isn’t going to be alone anymore, not if Dick can help it. They can work on the problem with Tony and the Ohnn once they get this situated first. He can’t go around panicking and coming to his own conclusions until he talks to the kid. No sense in repeating B’s mistakes. Universe knows that he’s still trying to escape that past.

“Lemme know if you need backup. I’ll tell Barry to suck it and come speeding over for you. Batman won’t be able to stop me from butting in.”

Wally sounds like he’s joking, but Dick knows he’s being serious. “Thanks, Wally. I mean it. I was kind of freaking out.”

There’s a knock on the door to the med bay. Stephanie sticks her head inside- for some reason, she has permanent marker all over her face. Someone had drawn “BOOOO” on her cheek and a frowny face on the other, but before Dick can even ask what the hell happened in the maybe fifteen or so minutes he was gone, Stephanie rolls her eyes and says, “You should see Tim. He’s the real loser right now.”

“Right. Makes all the sense in the world.”

“He got fussy about me wanting control of the Batcomputer! Doesn’t matter, I won in the end. Anyway,” She says, as if this is such a bother to her. Dick can’t help but grin at her. “Dinner is almost ready, so Alfred said we need to talk to Peter before and get it over with.”

“Sounds like your cue, Blue.” Wally chuckles. *“Tell Steph I said hi.”*

“Wally says hi.”

“Wally?” Steph snatches the phone. “Oh my gosh! Did Dick tell you!? He did? Well he probably didn’t tell you *everything*, so I’m gonna tell you. First of all, you have *got* to see this lady that is Peter’s mom-”

Steph charges out of the room, leaving Dick with one hand over his ear but completely empty. He stares at the door in defeat. He’s not going to get his phone back for at least two hours. Wally and Steph can talk for days and not get tired.

-

“This is complete bullshit!”

“Swear jar.” Cass corrects Damian idly. She’s more focused on braiding Peter’s hair as he sits on the floor in front of her than she is to what they’re doing. She has her legs tucked under her, wearing more comfortable clothes now, and her relaxed nature made it easy for Peter to relax as well. She had even given Peter a comfortable hoodie to wear, a “Gotham Knights” design on the front. He thinks it’s a baseball team?

Peter smirks as Damian’s character on the video game goes toppling off of the side, while Peter remains in the lead. The only reason Damian isn’t being more fussy is because Alfred the Cat has settled on his lap, and jostling him would be a war crime.

Right after Peter finally got Damian to cave in to let him see the turkey, they had gone to the second floor for Cass to change. Turns out, she’s in the mystery bedroom next to his, and Damian also shares a sitting room with them. Cass had given him the hoodie then, and he noticed that the hoodie was extra large, like she knew that Peter was uncomfortable having his neck so exposed.

Damian had led them outside after that. They had gone all the way out to a barn in the backyard. (Or, really, they don’t have a backyard. They have *land*. They were surrounded by forests instead of a cityscape and he had to squint to see where the fence line was. Where in Gotham could they have *possibly* fucking gone?) There, Peter had gotten to meet not only a turkey, but a cow with a *bat shaped mark on her face*. As if the cow is wearing a mask.

This was the best part of Peter’s life. Literally nothing could top the joy of opening the barn door and seeing a BatCow.

Damian approved of his enthusiasm. He was more than happy to tell Peter all about the animals that they have. When Peter saw Titus and Ace, he thought that maybe being kidnapped wasn’t so bad after all. Titus is a big black Great Dane that stuck to his side while they were in the barn, and Ace is a German Shepard that kept alerting to something about Peter that Damian kept waving off. They’re both super sweet, and Peter, who has always wanted a dog, had a blast playing fetch with them.

Alfred had called them inside when the sun started dipping low, using a *bell*, of all things, and that’s when Damian and Cass decided to actually show Peter around the Manor’s first floor. He thinks that rich people have way too much to do. He was shown a billiards room, smoking room, school room, cloak room, a powder room- which is apparently far different from a bathroom- a gallery filled with paintings from Bruce’s family line (and more importantly, Damian’s and Steph’s paintings. They’re artists, who knew? And really great ones, at that.), a real life *ballroom*. However, Peter’s favorite part would have to be the conservatory.

After that to, they ended up in the drawing room. It’s not a den, or a living room. Alfred had corrected that notion when he dropped off drinks for them. Apparently there’s a den somewhere, but this is not it? Whatever it is, it has a huge flat screen TV, a lot of comfortable couches, and a vast collection of video games that Peter has never seen before.

Doesn't stop him from kicking Damian's ass at them, though.

"Someone's a sore loser." Peter taunts jovially. He had started by just mashing the buttons until he figured out the patterns, and his work paid off. Damian scowls, trying to catch up in his own car to Peter's, but it's all in vain.

"I thought you said you've never played before?"

"I'm a fast learner!"

"You're a headache, is what you are." Damian grunts back.

"Do you wanna try something else?" Peter's car finishes across the finish line, thus ending the race. Damian sets his controller down with a huff, and starts looking at the other games in the stack. Cass runs her fingers through Peter's hair as she lets down the braid, and he leans into the touch.

"Have you seen this one before?" Damian holds out *Mortal Kombat*, but it's not *Mortal Kombat*. Instead of the characters that Peter knows, there's a few faces on the game that look strikingly familiar. Peter's eyes widen and he grabs the game from Damian's hand.

"What is this!?"

"It's *Vengeful Wrath*. Timothy's dumb friend Connor gave it to me for my birthday."

Forgive his language, but Peter is absolutely flabbergasted right now. After all, it's not every day he sees the *Avengers* on a video game.

It's not *them*, them, but it sure looks like it! Captain America is wearing the red, white and blue, but his shield is shaped like a star and is all shiny and white. Natasha is next to him, wearing a full face mask with a skull on it. Hulk, but he's yellow and has longer hair. And- Peter can't believe his eyes- Iron Man. His suit is black and yellow, and the lights are white, and yeah, okay, the technology isn't the same. Not nearly as advanced, he doesn't have the arc reactor in the middle of his chest. But it's *Iron Man*. Peter would recognize the silhouette anywhere.

"I have to play this right now."

"It's not *that* good." Damian's brow is furrowed. "It's not even that clever. The game mechanics are pretty simple for your first try, though."

"You have no idea how fast I can pick this up." Peter replies. He stands up to go switch the games out when:

hello! friend

He glances at the entry way right before Bruce rounds the corner. He stops there, looking around at them with a hint of trepidation. Peter stops mid step, anxiety rolling through him that he tries his best to hide. Cass sees it anyway, and she frowns, shooting him a worried glance.

This is Peter's first time seeing *Bruce* in person. Not Batman- he's met Batman a couple times now. The only idea of "Bruce" that he got was from those photos. The billboards, the posters, the bus stops, the big buildings with his name on them. Before, Bruce Wayne was just a name that Peter wouldn't imagine seeing in person. It was kind of impossible to correlate Batman and Bruce Wayne as being people who could *share* a room, let alone be the same person.

Peter's first impression of this version of Bruce is that the old man looks tired. His hair is not all gelled up and picture perfect like Peter sees all around the city, it's way more messy, like he just rolled out of bed a couple hours ago. He's dressed down in his casual clothes, just a t-shirt, a jacket, and some sweatpants. It makes him look far more human and, like, a real person. He finally looks like someone's dad rather than a business man or superhero.

Bruce observes them quickly. It's almost impressive how he takes in so much information in a single glance.

"Father," Damian greets. "I take it you all are done downstairs?"

"Yeah, we are." Bruce has one hand on his hip. "How about you and Cass head down there first? Peter and I will catch up in a second."

Damian doesn't hesitate. He scoops up Alfred the Cat in his arms and leaves the room with a nod towards Peter, like nothing could be wrong with this. Cass, however, lingers. She holds back to pat Bruce on the arm, whispering "*Gentle.*" to the man. She smiles encouragingly at Peter, trying to tell him that everything is going to be fine. The two traitors leave Peter with Bruce and this awkward conversation they're about to have.

Peter is still holding onto the knockoff Avengers game. He awkwardly glances at the cover, feeling a pang of longing for his mentors, for Tony.

"How are you feeling, chum?"

Chum? What kind of nickname is that? Peter looks up at him, keeping his emotional support knockoffs close. "I'm alright."

"I heard you had a headache. Did you get enough medicine for it?" Bruce steps closer into the room. He bends down to pick up a couple of the video games that Damian had scattered around the table. His lips turn up into the smallest of grins as he looks at the cover of one of them. "Damian gave you a tour?"

"I got enough." Not really, but it's whatever. "And yeah, he did."

Bruce glances at him, a curious twinkle in his eye. "You have an opinion."

The words just fall out of Peter's mouth. "A billiards room? Really?"

This gets him a low chuckle. "It's popular here in Bristol. Not that it gets used outside of the occasional gala."

"Jeez," Peter scoffs. "A *gala*? You can't just call it a party?"

To his credit, Bruce seems very used to people dogging on him for his money. He isn't even annoyed that Peter isn't bothering to hide that it's a lot. Peter can't talk much- he has Tony, now, after all, and Tony is anything but a *modest* man. But still. The kid that lived on the streets, and before that, in rooms as tiny as closets, will never let them know peace.

The mood shifts without them having to say much else. They both know what they need to talk about. The part of Peter that still wants to avoid the conversation is asking him to tell Bruce that he met the turkey.

Bruce takes a breath. It's almost unnoticeable that he's nervous, too. "About last night... You're a pretty courageous young man. I really have to thank you for keeping Tim safe."

Ugh. Like all compliments, Peter likes them, but doesn't know what to do with them. He avoids eye contact, stating, "I didn't really do that much."

"Agree to disagree." Bruce replies. "I'm just glad that you're alright. We were worried when you passed out."

Right, Peter did that. A laugh escapes him as he thinks about the *other* thing he did. Bruce raises a brow in question as to what's so funny. "Did you get all the sticky notes off your Batmobile?"

Bruce clears his throat in a noise that almost sounds like a laugh. "No, we didn't. Since someone didn't put them on the windows, we figured we'd just leave it for now."

"I made sure it could still be functional." Peter grins. After all, they wouldn't have had time to pull the sticky notes off the windshield if there was an emergency and they needed to see. Peter didn't know that he'd end up being part of the emergency, though.

"Thinking ahead is a good trait." Bruce comments.

"Trust an old man to make a prank sound like an assessment."

A soft laugh, and Bruce looks him over another time. Peter doesn't know if he's just really good with eye contact or if he's observing Peter's face. It feels like the latter- like he's searching for something. There's an almost sad quality to his thin smile. Bruce sighs in resignation.

"I have to let you know before we go downstairs, that the others are a little... eager. If it gets overwhelming, just let me know, and I'll make them go upstairs. Or, if you don't want to talk with them around at all, we can do it here. Just me and you, chum."

Yikes, choices. Peter's bad at those. Both ideas sound good... On one hand, he could just tell Bruce now and get it out of the way. On the other hand, they all deserve a first hand explanation from Peter after the run-around he's been giving them for a whole month. It's the second idea that does him in.

"It's alright. I wanna talk to everyone."

Bruce nods, running a hand over the back of his neck. “Alright then. Follow me, and I’ll show you to the Cave.”

“The BatCave?” Peter corrects. He stops himself right before getting to the entrance, and he turns back to set the video game down on the table. Bruce waits for him, glancing at the game before Peter joins him again.

“Yes, the BatCave.”

“I think that’s the only one you get a pass on.” Peter informs him. “Oh, and BatCow. She’s cooler than you, by the way.”

“Hard to argue with that.” Bruce pats his shoulder.

They go up a short set of steps that Damian and Cass hadn’t shown him on the tour. The very first door leads into a study, with suspiciously thick sounding walls- like someone had sound proofed them, to at least muffled it. It smells like old books and ink, as well as flowers. The last part makes sense when Peter spots a fresh vase on the desk, with the purple and pinks and yellows of a bouquet of fresh roses. It’s fairly big for just a study, with two couches, and a desk in front of a big stained glass window.

Like before when he was upstairs, Peter can feel a hollowness nearby. He searches around the room for the source, eyes falling on a grandfather clock that isn’t ticking.

“That spider-sense really is impressive.” Bruce says. “It’s easier to tell you’re not just looking around when you know about it.”

At the reminder that Bruce figured him out, Peter clicks his tongue and crosses his arms.

“Tim won’t tell me how you actually did it.”

“I used deep diving techniques to lower my heart rate and slow my breathing. I then moved when you were distracted by Tim, and reacted fast enough that you weren’t alerted until I was close by.”

“Next you’re gonna tell me you know how to move your liver on will, or something. And then I’ll be convinced you really aren’t human after all.”

His lips twitch into a knowing smile. For a second, Peter almost believes he was right on the money. Bruce doesn’t give him a reply to that. He reaches a hand towards the clock face, pulling back the glass. He turns the clock hands from 12 on the dot to 10:48. There’s a hollow click, and when Bruce steps back, the grandfather clock opens up to reveal a winding staircase behind it, lit up by small lights on each step. A cool wind washes over their feet.

like! like! dark cool like!

“Sick,” Peter breathes out in amazement despite his resolution to remain cool and mysterious. Bruce chuckles, and gestures for Peter to go down the staircase first. Of course, his first thought is that this could be a trap, but it’s thrown out seconds later because his spider-sense is begging him to go down there.

Which is likely due to the fact that Peter's spiderisms like dark and cool places, and a cave sounds like the perfect place for that. His humanisms, however, are already excitedly running through the possibilities of what could be in a superhero's secret base. Airplanes? Other cool cars like the Batmobile? Vending machines?

The steps were steep at the top, but as they get farther and deeper down into the cave, they widen out, and Peter can see light coming from ahead. He glances back at Bruce, wondering if he could ask about what's down there or if he should wait. Right as he starts gathering the courage, the cave widens out and Peter is met with his first view of the BatCave.

Any underestimations he could have had are swiped out from under his feet.

The steps empty out onto not rock, but a floor of metal. In front of the steps is the Bat-costume, standing tall and proud in a case. It's steps away from the still sticky-noted Batmobile that sits on a hydraulic turntable, facing towards a long stretch of road that goes towards the left, into a non-illuminated section.

Peter jogs over to the railing which overlooks the cave, footsteps echoing back minutely. The cave is ever bigger than Peter ever expected. There are multiple levels, built around the cave itself to give it stability and space. The entrance overlooks one level, almost like a mimic of the Wayne Manor and it overlooking the Great Hall. Peter's eyes widen as he takes in the view of what appears to be a trophy room.

One wall is covered in suits from over the vigilantes' careers. It almost reminds Peter of Tony's workshop with all of his suits standing in their own cases. Batman has the most of them, even ones that aren't in black, but are blue, grey, yellow- is that *pink*? What in the world did he need that for? There are others next to it, too. Robin suits, starting with one that looks like it fit a twelve year old, then moving on in the years.

Peter leans over the railing to see more, and despite the fact that Bruce should know Peter wouldn't fall, he grabs onto Peter's hoodie from the back to keep him from going over the side.

There's a giant, shiny penny, maybe standing several Batman's tall. Peter spots a sword in a glass case, a gavel, a *penguin*? Is that a fake *penguin*? There's big hanging dice from the ceiling, but most importantly-

"Is that a T-Rex!?" Peter can't help but sound delighted. Peter will never be too cool for a T-Rex. "Why do you have a T-Rex!? Is it alive? No, it can't be. But does it *come* to life? Is it a robot?"

"I like dinosaurs." Bruce replies, and Peter can tell he's proud of it. "No, it doesn't come to life. It's a robot that has been deactivated."

"I think it should. You can have a Bat-Rex! Literally no one would go against a Bat-Rex."

Even farther down, Peter can see a BatBoat or something, sitting in the water. Peter cranes his neck to see, and Bruce gently pulls him away from the edge. "You can see them closer when we pass through there."

Peter hurries along at that promise, he's holding Bruce to it. They have to take an elevator (an elevator! It doesn't have FRIDAY or an AI at all, but it's still so fricking cool!) down to the second level. Peter jogs out ahead of him to go look, spinning a couple times to try and see everything at once.

"I need to upgrade from my box." Peter comments to himself as he looks up at a display. Inside, there's several ray guns that Peter so wants to get a closer look at. One looks like it freezes things, another has a "shrink" option- "Does that say *magma*? It totally does! Does this shoot *lava*?"

"Your box?" Bruce prompts, ignoring Peter's actual questions.

"I have a box of things I get from my villains." Peter moves to the next display, bouncing on his toes excitedly. "Tinkerer always leaves stuff behind and I like to reverse engineer the less dangerous stuff. Sometimes Armadillo drops a scaley thing, or Black Cat leaves behind one of her tools. She steals mine, so it's only fair. But nothing as cool as *this*. I didn't know you could keep the big stuff."

"Hm." Bruce stands next to him, a thoughtful furrow to his brow. "That is a magma gun, yes."

"So cool! Which villain did that come from?"

"B!" Jason's voice cuts through the air. Peter startles and looks behind him, and Bruce gets the guiltiest look on his face. Jason has his arms crossed, standing at the entrance of another room. Peter wouldn't even have to try to read "*Really, Old Man?*" on Jason's face right now. "He has all the time in the world to look at the cases later."

"Boo." Peter totally doesn't pout about that.

Jason snorts at that. "Come on, Boy Mystery, you can't leave us hanging forever."

"Yeah, Peter!" Steph shouts from inside the room. A second later and she's shoved all 6'5" of Jason out of her way. She hurries over to him, and Peter is trapped in a tight hug without warning. "I missed you! It sucks being on the sidelines, I miss all the fun! This is so not fair!"

"Hi?" Peter pats her shoulder. Steph lets go to let him breathe, but she drags him by the arm towards the other room. Bruce sighs before he follows.

Everyone's there, but he didn't expect any less. Tim and Damian are at a multi-screened computer on the other side of the room. Babs waves at him from one of the screens, and he waves back at her. Cass is leaning on the desk, looking over one of the screens that shows a radiation level- oop, that has his name on it. Duke is pointing something out to Cass, and she nods. Duke is surprised by that, but she shakes her head and whispers "Later."

Jason and Dick are both sitting at a table filled with broken bat equipment. Dick perks up when he sees Peter, hands out in a nervous greeting. "Hey, bud! Feeling alright?"

“I’m guessing you finished your paperwork.” Dick winces, an awkward laugh escaping him. Peter’s arm is finally released from Steph’s hold. She flops into the chair next to Tim, who- “Why is Coupon covered in sharpie?”

“He lost.” Steph replies, folding her hands together as Alfred the Cat jumps into her lap. Tim has random lines all over his face, and Peter’s noticing a cup with only a singular pen in it next to the computer. A suspicious lack of markers.

“Peter, you were bitten by a *radioactive* spider?” Damian must not have been there for their discovery, because he’s still reading all of the screens. “When did *that* happen?”

“No, actually, I want to know about Tony first. Why is he a God? No, let me reword that.” Duke tries.

“Tony’s not a God? Who told you that?” Peter asks. Then, Peter is slapped in the face with the memory of a bunch of suppli and stress levels off the wazoo. “Oh, did *I* somehow tell you that?”

“What do you mean he’s *not* a God? I saw it!” Duke protests.

“Uh, about that-” Peter’s voice cracks embarrassingly.

“Hold on hold on hold on, we need to start somewhere else. Like Ohnn, maybe, because who the hell even is that guy?” Steph interrupts.

Peter’s hands feel sweaty. He wipes them on his pants and tucks his hands inside the sleeves. Dick stands up from his chair to stand next to Peter, setting a strong hand on his shoulder. The others are still arguing as Dick speaks to just him. Just like Bruce, Dick is examining his face, like he’s just now noticing it. “Ignore them, they’re all over the place. Start where you want to, and we’ll try not to interrupt.”

“Um...“ Peter is blanking on his entire story. “I *don’t* know where to start.”

“How about you start from when you got to our world?”

A silence hushes over the room, and every eye turns on Tim. He’s looking right at Peter, leaned back in his chair. God, he looks so stupid with his face covered in sharpie and his has his crutches on the ground next to him, but his eyes are clear and sharp and it’s like he sees right through Peter. It’s a far different person than Peter has met up to this point- or maybe he just didn’t see it, because Tim always was able to hide it, until now.

Dick’s hand tightens on Peter’s shoulder, but when Peter looks up to check he’s not angry at him, he’s staring at Tim in shock.

“How long did you know?” Peter asks Tim.

A smirk crosses Tim’s face, all too smug. It only grows wider when Damian’s jaw drops, and he points at Peter. “He’s *right!*?”

“Of course I am.” Tim sits up straighter, all professional and proud of himself. “I figured it out the same day of the Two-Face incident. Everything was right there in front of me. You don’t *exist* in this world no matter where I go to find you. Even now, after a DNA test, you don’t come up in any database. You’re a vigilante who’s been working for at least a couple years, and Tony is some kind of mentor figure for you, but we’ve never heard of either of you. That would be *impossible*, unless, of course, you came from somewhere we wouldn’t know about. And the only place the Justice League can’t monitor is an alternate dimension we don’t know anything about.”

Tim doesn’t give the others to let that sink in. He pushes forward, and as he does, Peter can’t help his own grin from spreading. “You came up out of nowhere with a villain we’ve heard nothing about either, so I’m assuming he’s from your world as well. Tony didn’t drop you off here like we assumed, you’ve just been staying with Benny because you had nowhere else to go when you got to Gotham. You made a good move going to the library and getting yourself into the computers, *twice*, without Babs being able to monitor what you were doing. Babs told me you were looking up the Academic Decathlon site, but you don’t go to that school, because you don’t exist here. When we were at Batburger, you made a comment about alternate dimensions and the heroes that could exist there. I didn’t notice the importance at the time because we also talked about time travel, but you were probably sniffing out if we would believe you, weren’t you?”

Peter crosses his arms. Tim had him figured out after the Two-Face incident, but apparently no one else considered that.

“What was the nail in the coffin?”

“You didn’t know about Young Justice.” Tim says.

“Arrogance?” Peter raises a brow.

“We’re a subject of controversy now, even after a decade of teenage heroes. You would have grown up hearing about this from every news source, social media, word of mouth. Not even being ‘chronically offline’ could keep that from you. Also, I need to mention: only someone chronically *online* would say that?”

“You also just mentioned several villains I have never heard of.” Bruce says. Peter turns to look at him. The older man has his eyes narrowed at Tim, who just shrugs, not caring that he kept this from them. “We probably would have figured this out sooner if someone had shared that information he had.”

“Tim,” Dick’s voice is far too level. Tim actually manages to look guilty this time. “You didn’t think that was important for us to know?”

“Sorry, Dick... It’s just... I was *going* to tell you guys my suspicions, but Damian-”

“You are *not* pinning this on me.”

“You were *sooooo* smug that you figured out he was Spider-Man!” Tim glares at Damian.

“Fuck, Tim, how could you stomach eating those paninis while you were keeping that to yourself out of some petty revenge?” Jason mocks, but he’s grinning ear to ear. “You waited, what, five days?”

“Huh. So playing the long game *can* work. Maybe he should reread the Art of War.” Peter thinks out loud, picturing Tim and Loki in the same room. Loki would *love* this.

“Peter, he’s right? You’re from an alternate dimension?” Steph wheels her chair a little closer, her eyes shining with interest. “That explains *so* much!”

“Jeez, and we were panicking earlier...” Duke sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “So how did you get *here*?”

“First, I need to clarify that whole ‘God Tony’ thing. I lied when I told you that was Tony. I thought you were gonna snitch to Batman, and Loki probably also messed with me to say it.” Peter tells him. Duke’s eyebrows raise. “He likes playing tricks. He probably also made you more mad at him than you should be. He has that ability.”

“*Hold on, Loki?*” Babs blinks at him. She had been observing in quiet silence like Cass, but upon the mention of the God, her eyes were sharp. “*As in the Norse God?*”

“Yeah. I don’t know about if he has an alternate here, but he’s definitely the Loki from my world. He’s... an ally, I think. You can never tell with Loki. He’s been cool with me so far, but Thor has told me enough stories that makes it clear to expect an agenda. He’s been going back and forth between our worlds to get information from both sides.” Peter explains, scratching the back of his head. “*Tony* is my foster dad, and he’s my mentor, like Tim said. They are two different people.”

“So- this whole time...?” Dick drags a hand down his face.

“I told you guys that he’s a nice guy.” Peter shrugs. “I would have clarified earlier, but I did *not* know you guys, nor trust you in any capacity. Sorry.”

“No, no, that makes sense. For all you knew, you could have stepped into a world with far different morals than your own.” Steph thinks it over. Peter knows that was part of it, but the bigger part was him having severe trust issues and a history of being experimented on. “So... what *happened*?”

“Tony is the hero Iron Man, in my universe. He’s part of a group like your Justice League, called the Avengers. Ohnn attacked me a month ago and brought me here as leverage over Tony, but I don’t know what *for*. There’s... honestly, there’s a *billion* reasons he could have. He wants something, but it hasn’t been clarified *what* he wants. His brain is sort of scrambled from whatever turned him into a snake-mutant. They didn’t know I was Spider-Man, though.”

“They?” Bruce asks.

“Ohnn is working with someone else. There’s a few leads that they have to investigate on their side, but Tony’s biggest suspect is a company called OSCORP.”

“Why can’t Loki just bring you back?” Babs asks him. “You said he’s traveling between our worlds.”

“Because it’d kill me.” Peter shrugs. “The way that he takes to get back and forth is meant for beings like him to cross. Even with my healing, it’d probably rip me apart. Ohnn’s method isn’t pretty either. He isn’t using magic, he made a device that works like a particle accelerator. I’ve been trying to get it from him so that we can get back, but he’s slippery.”

“Right, okay.” Steph nods. Every Bat in the room has their thinking face on. “So he brought you here, to our world... why? Couldn’t he hold you leverage in your world?”

“This would have been solved day one if I was still back home.” Peter is sure of it. “Tony would have been able to track me down, or I would have escaped. It’s not just Tony that’s on his case either. There are other heroes that were in New York when I was grabbed. It was a smart move getting me as far as possible if they really wanted that leverage over Tony. But they don’t have nearly as much leverage since I got away from Ohnn before he could send proof of life to them.”

“So, both sides are stuck having to wait for Ohnn and this mystery partner of his to show up in order to stop him. And then there’s the issue of getting you back home.” Jason muses. “We could see if any of our magic users or someone else are able to be contacted...”

“I can’t leave Ohnn in this universe.” Peter tells them sternly, leaving no room for debating that matter. “He’s a problem from my world, and he belongs there. And if he’s really working with OSCORP or another villain organization, we’ll need his intel to sniff that out.”

“But getting you back would mean he has no reason to come here.” Duke points out. Peter shakes his head.

“No, he’s been sniffing around Wayne Industries as well.” Bruce crosses his arms, deep in thought.

“He wants tech for that device of his. I’ve seen it up close. It’s impressive, but it’d be even more impressive with cohesive parts. That’s sort of why I don’t believe that OSCORP is who he’s working with. It’s a major tech company like Stark Industries, and if they were partnered with him, they’d have given him better tools.”

“Well, I know one thing for sure.” Dick says, and Peter looks up to see he’s got a determined grin. “You don’t have to try and capture Ohnn by yourself.”

Right. Peter’s not alone anymore. He hasn’t been, not really, this entire time. It felt like it in the very beginning, but it was his own stubbornness that prevented him from reaching out to these heroes.

It’s like the weight of the world has just dropped off his shoulders. Not being alone sounds *so nice*.

“Is your name really Peter Grayson?”

Peter is mid chew of the most delicious dinner, so he almost doesn't notice how the table reacts to Damian's question.

He's been in a *great* mood since he finally told them everything. He's got more than a couple meals in his stomach, he got to meet a turkey and a cow, he knows he's going to get a decent night's sleep before going to get his stuff from Benny's tomorrow- Oh, and telling Benny that he's alive, and to thank him for giving Peter a place to stay all this time.

That's right. Peter decided to finally accept their offer to stay here. Not only because it makes more sense, but because it feels right. He's comfortable here, and the Bats are weird in a nice way. He'll get used to the stupidly mysterious and big Manor, and hopefully, within the next month, he'll get to go home.

The thought does strike him as sad enough to make his chest twist uncomfortably when he remembers that going home means he won't see them again. But for now, all is good, and Peter can ignore that ache like he ignores all the rest. It's a problem for later, when he's alright.

Dick chokes on his drink. He's sitting next to Peter in the dining room- the room they usually eat dinner in is just a little too small for all of them. Jason claps his hand on Dick's back to help him breathe, Tim nudges Damian just unsubtle enough that Peter notices it. Damian, sitting across from Peter, hasn't turned his eyes away from Peter, examining his face much the same that Bruce and Dick had, but much more intense than they did.

Peter blinks, choosing to swallow his food when Alfred raises a brow at him in warning not to speak with his mouth full.

He totally forgot about that.

“No, it's not.” Peter chuckles sheepishly. “I didn't know if I had an alternate here yet or not, so I just said my Dad's old last name.”

It's like Peter shot a gun into the air rather than just explained himself. Everyone is starting intently at their plates- all besides Damian.

“So what is your *real* name?”

“I feel like you're implying you want my full legal name, freak.”

“That would be adequate as well.” Damian replies.

“Seriously, you want my entire name?”

“You owe us.”

Peter rolls his eyes, but obliges. “You only get to use that card two more times before it's played out. My *full* legal name is Peter Benjamin John Andrea Parker.”

“Did your father change his last name when he got married?” Damian asks. Tim’s fork scrapes on the plate, and Damian side eyes him.

“No, he changed it when he was adopted.” Peter’s brow furrows. They’re acting suspicious. He looks to Cass for an explanation, only to find she has snuck away to help Alfred with something in the kitchen.

“Did he *want* to change it?” Dick sounds a little upset. Peter catches him blink away a wetness to his eyes.

He... *is* in a room full of other orphans. Maybe none of them changed their last names? He had just assumed, hadn’t he, that they all had Wayne? Peter never wants to change his name, so he can understand that must be hard to imagine, if they feel the same.

“No, not really. His parents’ case was a media fire though, and people kept bothering him when they looked him up. So he changed his name when my grandparents adopted him.” Peter tells them. He hadn’t been alive for that, obviously, and he didn’t think to ask Uncle Ben about the full story until he was 8 years old.

“Were they famous?” Damian asks. This time, Tim harshly elbows his side.

“Stop roughhousing at the table.” Dick scolds, but his heart doesn’t seem to be in it.

“They were world-renowned acrobats. The Flying Graysons.” Peter says. Bruce looks up from his plate and Dick tenses at his side. “The tent caught on fire during their act and they fell.”

Dick sucks in a breath. He hasn’t touched his plate since Damian started asking him questions. Peter almost asks what’s wrong, because Dick seems like he’s in pain, almost, but Damian continues.

“So you were raised as a Parker. How did Tony become your foster parent?”

“Damian, maybe Peter doesn’t wanna talk about this.” Steph says this as if it’s a question, but it sounds more like a warning.

“It’s fine?” Peter is so thoroughly confused right now. “My parents died in a plane crash when I was little, and then my aunt and uncle passed. Tony ended up becoming my foster parent after he found out I was Spider-Man.”

“Who else is done with their food?” Jason abruptly stands from his seat. Dick passes his near full plate with little thought, and seeing that Peter was done, he grabs Peter’s too. “Damian, grab the others and come with me.”

“But-”

“Now, *please*. ”

Damian doesn’t huff, but he is frustrated. He grabs the rest of the plates, following behind Jason. Peter hears Jason hiss, “*What was the point of that?*” and Damian reply, “*Were any of*

you going to ask him? You didn't even tell me until I saw the computer myself."

"Cups!" Duke stands up, grabbing cups from the table. "Tim, help me with these?"

"I can help?" Peter offers, but Duke smiles and shakes his head.

"Nah, nah, I got it, kid. Thanks, though!" And they're off.

Steph stands up as well, already pulling her jacket on. "I'm actually gonna go see my mom tonight. She wants a movie marathon! Fun, right?" She leans over to kiss Peter's cheek, then the top of Dick's head as she makes her way out. "I'll see you two later!"

Peter is left looking at a near empty dining room. It's just him and Dick, and Bruce left at the head of the table. The others left in practically the blink of an eye. He looks to Bruce or Dick for something- a clarification, a reason, only to find Dick is lost in thought and Bruce is watching him with evident worry.

"Did I say something?"

Bruce's gaze is pulled towards him. Still, worry. "No, chum. They're just eager to get to patrol."

Sure *feels* like Peter said something. He doesn't even know what to do with that. Nothing comes to mind as overly crazy, unless they're *that* uncomfortable with talking about Peter's family?

"When do you guys go out?" He asks. He could at least try to clear his head with patrol. There are some regular spots that he goes to now, that he sort of hopes will cheer him up to see. Like Analetta, the little girl that he walked home with her mother, leaves out candy for him on her window, and Peter leaves a sticky note behind to let her know he came by to keep them safe.

"Alfred would like if you rested a few more days and got your strength up." Bruce tells him.

"I'm fine, though. I slept it off already."

"Just a few days. You can let your body get used to eating more than just burgers." Bruce tries for a joke as he stands up, picking up his own plate. "Dick?"

Dick takes a second to pull himself out of his mind. "Yeah?"

"Some of your old clothes might fit Peter. He's going to need a set of pajamas for tonight before we get his things tomorrow." Bruce says in a gentle voice. Dick nods slowly, pulling himself out of whatever stupor he's in and smiling at Peter like everything is normal.

"Sounds like a plan. Those clothes are in my closet, I think."

He playfully pulls Peter's chair back for him when he gets out of his own. Peter hops to his feet, following after Dick but glancing back at Bruce. The old man has tucked his tail to hide in the kitchen with the others.

Peter doesn't get it. As Dick leads him through the halls to go upstairs, he tries to run through everything that he said at dinner. There's... nothing that comes to mind as anything weird. Instead of following behind Dick, Peter makes sure to keep at his side.

"Is everything *really* okay?" He asks, praying that Dick will be honest with him.

"You didn't do anything wrong, bud." Dick says it with enough conviction that Peter tries to believe him. "They just hate awkward conversations, and you and I gotta have one."

"Oh." Peter lets out, nerves bundling in his chest.

Dick doesn't need a sixth sense to detect that Peter started feeling stressed. His eyes widen and he stops in front of one of the sitting room doors, setting a hand on his shoulder. "no no no, nothing- nothing *bad*, I swear. It's- We have to talk about our backstory."

"...Backstory?"

"We don't exactly want to keep you a *secret*." Dick tells him, opening the door to the sitting room. This was the room with the locked door that Peter avoided earlier. "You know, the whole billionaire thing. People get in our business a lot, and our secret identities are a must. The press is scared of B 'cause he's made it pretty clear that they shouldn't talk about his kids, but if they see you-

"They're gonna assume Bruce adopted me too?" Peter feels the tension from him release.

"You know, you don't have to teach me about the press."

"I don't?" Dick opens the door to his bedroom.

"No. Tony taught me." Peter grins, and he revels in the confusion Dick has for a second.

"He's a billionaire like Bruce. The Stark Industries I mentioned earlier? It was his family's company."

Dick stops in the doorway, turning around, gobsmacked. "Seriously?"

"Yeah!" Peter *knew* it would be funny to drop that on him. "So, is that what you were worried about? Teaching me how to deal with the press? 'Cause Tony, gave me all kinds of advice. Like, looking my best so I at least look cool when the paps try to sneak my photo."

The older man shakes his head in disbelief, muttering "*Of course*." under his breath as he makes his way into his room. Peter stands at the doorway for a second, just looking around.

It's clear that Dick had moved out at some point, but that he still visits often. The room has a lot of the same elements of Peter's, but it isn't so bare-bones as his is. Dick's room is full of life. The canopy bed has string lights on the headboard, as well as taped Polaroids and printed pictures of what looks like Dick with his friends and family. The walls were painted a pretty light blue, any whites in the room are more of a sandy white, sort of like a beach. It's hard to see the blue walls, though, because every inch is covered in posters. The bookshelf has more than just a vast collection of books, and it mostly centers around things that Dick has put on display.

Peter walks over to the bookshelf to see as Dick opens his closet door. There's sea shells and coins from all over the world in one spot. A pink music box that has a broken handle. There's tickets to concerts, there's framed photos of him and Bruce, and Jason, and Alfred, all looking younger. There's one picture with a 13 year old Tim and Dick at an ice cream shop.

It's very cozy, which suits Dick, Peter thinks. He doesn't know *that* much about the guy, but the room matches his vibe really well.

"It's less about the paparazzi- they really are scared of Bruce, besides Vicki Vale. We're more worried about what to tell them, if they see you." Dick sounds hesitant. He's pulled a box down from the top shelf of his walk in closet, and he's now kneeling on the floor to dig through it. Peter wanders over, crouching down next to him.

"Backstory."

"Yeah." Dick pulls out a black sweatshirt with something called "THE GREY GHOST" on it. He blinks at the huge swath of fabric, then sets it down with a sigh. "I told Bruce I lost that, and it was here the whole time."

Peter chuckles at that. Dick pulls out another hoodie, this time it's white and has no design. He also pulls out some pajama pants and socks. Peter almost wonders about underwear, but Dick mutters that Alfred probably already put some in his room.

"So, Peter..." Dick stands up, and Peter tucks the clothes under his arms. "We don't know how long you'll be here, so we need to set up some type of guardian for you."

"Is that not the serial kidnapper- I mean, adopter?"

Dick lets out a breathy laugh. "No. I was- I was hoping you'd be okay if I did that?"

Oh. Peter hadn't considered that. All signs had pointed to Bruce being the one who'd take him in. But Dick is nice too, actually. He knows Dick better than he does Bruce, even though he's apparently going to live in Bruce's house. It does sort of settle on him, however, that he *doesn't* know how long it could take to catch Ohnn. Maybe, at some point, he's going to have to work on getting home rather than catching Ohnn. He can't stay here forever just because Ohnn is here too.

Tony is waiting back home. Pepper, Ned, his teachers. Ben and May's graves are there. His parents, too. As long as Peter is here, he can't see any of them. and Queens is missing him too, he hopes. Spider-Man has so many people in his world that he checks up on, and he doesn't think Loki has been taking up the Spider-Man mantle too.

He might be here long enough that he needs a guardian. But-

"That's okay with me." Peter says honestly. Dick relaxes, and Peter figures that must have been what was worrying him the whole time. Peter *does* have a history of running away when they get close. "I mean, it's temporary and necessary. I'll be going home soon now that I have you guys."

“Right. Yeah.” Dick nods. He picks up the box and brings it into the closet again. Peter takes another glance around the room, getting a good look at the posters.

There’s one that catches his eye, out of all the others.

It’s not just because it’s prominently displayed, or that the colors are bright and fun. At first, it’s just that the name “Grayson” catches his eye, and Peter is surprised to see it. He had *just* been talking about his grandparents, after all. But the longer he stares, the more Peter understands.

THE FLYING GRAYSONS

The name stands out on the backdrop so plainly, but it takes Peter reading it several times for his brain to comprehend it. Peter walks closer to the poster while hearing Dick put the box away in the closet.

“I’m Dick Grayson.” He had introduced himself to Peter.

The conversation that he just had about his parents at the table- Dick had looked *sad*, not scared. Like he couldn’t fathom this, like it hurt him to hear. The two acrobats on the poster are colored in as silhouettes, but Peter remembers a box of video tapes of performances and practices that he used to watch for hours on end, dreaming about being like them, about having that connection to people he never got to know, that were his family. In that box, there had been the exact same poster. Only, his hadn’t included the names of the acrobats.

John Grayson, Mary Grayson, Richard Grayson

“Oh.”

He laughs, first. Out of shock, mostly, maybe confusion. He can’t believe it, at first. His brain tries to convince him that it’s just a coincidence. But the logical part of his brain screams at him *don’t be fucking stupid*. And that’s when all the humor is blown away, and Peter is left rocking in the aftermath.

Peter sits down on the bed, staring at the poster as it stares back at him. He hears Dick suck in a breath when he comes back, but Peter can’t look away from the poster.

His dad had been named Richard Grayson. His grandparents, John and Mary. It was staring Peter in the face the whole time, but he had overlooked it. Had he been avoiding thinking of it, or had he just not considered it a possibility?

Or did Peter really not recognize his own father’s face?

He wants to feel something, *anything*. But what he feels is... numb. It’s the same as when Peter waited in Ben and May’s window for his parents’ car to pull up, on a rainy summer day, a few days after his birthday. He turned four, and he was so excited to have his birthday party with his mom and dad. They were going to go to the space museum together. Dad promised.

But the car never pulled up, and Ben and May were in the kitchen on the phone. Peter moved from waiting at the window to sitting on the porch step, looking down the street where the car

usually pulled up.

It's the same feeling as when May sat down next to him, and she'd been crying, and she says that she needs to talk to Peter.

It's the same feeling as a funeral Peter didn't go to, because he was so little, that he didn't understand. There weren't any caskets, because they died in the ocean, falling out of the sky, and would never make it back home.

The same feeling as visiting headstones, and not remembering their faces.

It's numb, and nothing, and everything all at the same time.

The bed dips as Dick sits down next to him, hands folded together. He tries to speak, but the words must be lost on him, too. It takes what Peter thinks must be hours for Dick to say anything.

"I didn't know how to tell you." Dick says, his voice barely above a whisper. Peter would say it's his victim voice, the one he'd use on a little kid that just lost a parent, but that's not really the case here. It's raw, like Dick was struggling to understand it himself. "We saw it earlier, when the DNA results came in... I'm so sorry we didn't say it earlier. There was a lot going on, and we didn't want to leave that on you in front of everyone."

Peter stares at that poster.

"Are you okay, Peter?"

"I'm tired."

He didn't know he was going to say that until he says it, but it sounds right. Peter finally looks at Dick, and the man has the most vulnerable expression on his face, like he'd been ripped apart and exposed for everyone to see. And Peter sees his eyes are a little watery and there's guilt. And Peter, numb, can't think about what that means, or why he even feels that way.

"I'm gonna go to sleep." Peter tells him, feeling breathless. Dick's brow furrows in confusion, searching Peter's face for a couple heartbeats. His expression softens, though Peter doesn't know what he finds.

"Okay." Dick says. "That's okay. You've had a big day. We can talk later."

Peter stands up. Dick doesn't follow him out the door, but Peter manages to say, "Goodnight"

"Goodnight."

-

Peter's door opens while he's laying in the bed. That numb feeling had taken over him, and he somehow managed to blink and find himself dressed in the new clothes and laying down, looking out the window and watching the moon peek out from behind the clouds. The Not-

Silence that he heard earlier feels much more like regular silence at night. The walls muffle everyone's heartbeats, and Peter can only hear the wind in the trees.

hello friend

No light spills out from the hallway, because everything is dark in the Manor now. He thought everyone else had left on patrol, or just left. But Peter hears two heartbeats at the door, and one of them is Damian.

"Ace," he whispers. "*Leg dich hin.*"

The dog's paws patter across the floor, and then jumps into the bed with Peter. He whines smally as he tucks himself under Peter's arm, laying his head down on Peter's neck. Peter's hand runs through the fur without thinking about it, and Ace's heartbeat is steady. The door closes, and Peter falls asleep like that.

Chapter End Notes

(^_^) ... How we feeling??? HAHAAH I've been WAITING for this chapter for SOOOOOOOOO long you have no idea,,,

A couple things:

-Superman is a good dad in this universe FUCKKKKK the way he treated Kon in canon. Me personally? If I had a son who was a clone of me, I'd save my freaking out for literally any other person and would treat my new son with all the love in my soul. But that's just me ig

-Kaldur is mentioned! Yes, he and Wally are alive. I have to point out that with all of the different canons and shit... I do not care. This is my world and my sandbox and if I want them there then they are there <3

-How many of you are rechecking the tags right now? :3 Yes, it's been there since the beginning! Richard Parker is Richard Grayson. I should point out (even though I'll also have Peter say this too) that 1) he grew up associating his father with the Parker name, even though logically Peter knew his father had another last name. and (this one is my favorite part) 2) Peter 100% thought the nickname "Dick" was for the name Robert or William, not Richard. This is based off of me as a child who was appalled when I found out my teacher went by that name and I said 'but your name is Richard!?' and he had to break it to me that my life was a lie.

it's him or me, the world will never be the same

Chapter Summary

“You’re lying.” Maps breathes out, suspicious. Her friend, on the other hand, with zero hesitation:

“Whoa! Peter got Bruced!” He slaps another kid’s arm to emphasize his point. The other rubs his shoulder with a pout. “I told you! He’s really nice, like that Grayson guy! And that Timothy guy!”

“It was only a matter of time...” Science Project girl sighs, all melancholy.

Chapter Notes

Hello Hello Hellooooo again my loves!! I'll keep the beginning a/n short!

- 1) the dates that you see are important, but don't stress about remembering them. they're just there to show what is happening when, if any of my fellow freaks like to go back and see that after later chapters come out
- 2) trigger warnings: dissociation, gore, talks of drugs and kidnapping
- 3) this chapter is 26,304 words! approx time: 1 hour and 45 minutes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

NOV 2

Let it be known that for as emotionally unstable as their family is, they are at least aware of it. “Working” on it might be a very loose idea, but they’ve been coming around for the better part of 2 years now. At least they are actually confronting their personal problems, looking within, going to therapy and shit like that. They could be shouting it away and pretending they hate each other like they used to do. Jason thinks it counts for something that they’re trying.

At the moment, though, the house is wrapped in a tension that hasn’t been prevalent in a long while. Sure, Dick hadn’t *told* them that he told Peter, but they’re smart enough to figure it out. No one is yelling, no one is trying to get away with murder, no one is losing their mind. But Dick is moping in the training room with that sad puppy dog face he gets when he’s feeling awful and guilty about something, and Peter...

Well, Jason expected something like Dick. The kid gets angry the same way, why not have panic attacks the same way? He *thought* that Peter had checked out, just like Dick does, but when the next morning, when he had approached what was a silent kid with a far off look in his eyes, Peter had snapped to reality and smiled at him.

Like nothing had happened, like nothing important was weighing on his mind. He made a joke about their big house, had asked Jason a billion questions about the BatCave and the dinosaurs... and the Batmobile. And the numerous suits that are on display (Jason is still thankful that Bruce doesn't keep his old suit in the cave anymore). Really, he talked about everything *but* the bombshell that no doubt had been given to him last night. It's not everyday that someone finds out that for the last month they've been talking to a version of their dead father that is very much alive and has a completely different family and was trying to adopt them without even him knowing they were related.

(Yeah, Jason thinks this revelation- no thanks to Tim's loving help- is both a blessing and a curse.

On one hand, it means there are no more clones, no secret enemies (at least, from their world), no questionable parentage of some teenagers who *really* are strangers to each other. That much means a lot, considering it could have been *way* too much to handle.

But on the other hand, it means that Dick and the rest of them can't keep the kid.

The thought feels inescapable to Jason, and no doubt the rest, too. It looms overhead like a big reminder they can't have anything nice for very long. Forget that Dick was about to buy a damn *house* and adopt him so they could have some happy family together. The rest of them want Peter too.

Bruce, the damn fool, is already trying to spoil the kid to death. Jason saw it last night in the Cave- Peter, obviously being himself and running around to look at the displays while Bruce stood there all fond for the fact that he has a *grandkid*. (A *grandpa* at 42 years old.) He saw it in the subtle comment before they left the house this morning that Peter could use the workshop downstairs whenever he wanted to, and of *course* Bruce could show Peter where they keep the material for their suits so he can make a new mask. Would he like any help with it? Let him know if there's anything he can do, chum.

He's not the only one. But he's the biggest, most obvious culprit, which is insane, because Bruce is *Batman*.

Duke is excited to have another super-powered Bat on the team, if all of his ramblings about the possibilities of Peter's spider-whatevers has anything to say (Jason's been told the hyphen is apparently important to add to Peter's "spider-whatevers"). Steph adores Peter like he's her newest little cousin to pester, and Jason... thinks they should keep an eye on that. Steph is the most trouble-loving of them and Peter is a menace the same way.

Babs had also grown attached to him, and that was the second he arrived. Peter had let them know that the day he showed up at the library was the day he got to Gotham in the first place. She's been getting live updates from everyone in that stupid group chat, and what she had to say this morning was that she's "*of the firm belief that Peter will come around.*"

Damian and Tim are already welcoming Peter like he's their brother- the fights that are just banter with a couple rounds of elbows to the face, dumb nicknames, and an overall sense of being annoying? It's like Damian has a long lost twin or something. Though technically Peter isn't a brother, but a nephew, they're all close enough in age that it wouldn't feel that way.

Jason, though? He's a 23 year old college student, not anywhere close to their youth, and he was excited to have a *nephew*.

Honestly, he still is. Just because Peter is going to leave doesn't mean that he's stopped considering Peter to be family. He knows Cass feels the same way, because she keeps referring to Peter as "*my little nephew*."

She probably knew before any of them, with that language of hers. She probably saw Spider-Man and made the connection between him and Dick immediately. If she had, she's keeping it to herself. Her only comment about it is a sweet smile that tells Jason nothing.

Even if they have to say goodbye to Peter, they at least have him right now.

But also, saying goodbye is not something their family is good at.)

Everyone had told Dick that he has to tell Peter as soon as possible, when they were *alone*, so Peter could properly freak out with no one there to witness it and make it more overwhelming. That's because everyone expected this revelation to come with a lot more... freaking out. But Jason doesn't know *what* Peter is feeling about it.

The kid isn't open to questions at the moment, or so, Jason gets the vibe. All morning, he'd been acting as if everything is fine. He keeps on with his *Just Peter*, *Mister Alfred*, and Alfred keeps on with *Just Alfred*, *Master Peter*. He ate breakfast with Damian and Bruce (because on Saturdays, Tim doesn't emerge from his room until 2PM, and Jason was sort of out of it until he had eaten something, but he'd been informed that Peter was acting normal) and doesn't show a hint that anything is wrong.

The only sign that Peter *is* stressed out is Ace. The dog has been trained for that- trained for *everything*, pretty much. He runs to get Dick or Bruce if Jason is having a flashback, he sits on Tim or Dami's laps when they start picking at their fingernails or overwork themselves while training. Ace alerts when someone is experiencing high levels of stress. (He's also a tracking dog named the Bat-Hound when Batman needs him at night. He's just as much of an overachiever as the rest of the family.)

He alerts for Peter, which leaves a sour taste in Jason's mouth. Because if it weren't for Ace, Peter would have gotten away far longer with his little charade. Ace only stops when Bruce sits next to Peter and pats the dog's head, and they talked... about robots or something. Jason was still halfway through breakfast, so he doesn't remember that part.

That doesn't mean Peter stopped being stressed. It just means that Ace knows something is being done about it.

Actually, no, Jason lied. There is *another* sign that something is wrong. When Dick came up for breakfast, Peter was out of there so fast that Jason blinked and he was in the kitchen

washing his plate and then blinked again and he was gone entirely. The disappearing act was almost as impressive as Zatanna's magic. Dick hadn't thought the same. He sat at the table picking at his blueberry waffles in such a pitiful state that Bruce and Damian had tried to cheer him up by giving him some smuggled in canned whipped cream.

(Alfred hadn't let it slide. There's many foods that he'll turn a blind eye to in cases like these, but an abomination of canned whipped cream when he could make it himself? Bruce had the decency to look like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.)

Jason figures that it's best to let this lie, for now. It's not his place yet to butt in. Peter's not hurting himself, really, and he only *just* got the news, so he gets at least a week of avoiding it before Jason steps in. But he *can* be there for the kid, avoiding it or not. So instead of Dick going with Peter to Benny's to get his stuff, Jason goes.

Looks like Peter is still willing to stay with them as planned. He hasn't indicated otherwise, like he wants to go back to Benny's after all and *really* avoid Dick, and by extension, the rest of the Bats. So... that could be worse.

Benny did turn out to be a good guy, like Dick had mentioned. He'd been worried when Peter hadn't returned last night, and was relieved to find out that Peter is going to stay with the Waynes. He had looked surprised for about five seconds, until he muttered, "*Was only a matter of time.*" Like Bruce really is an ancient being that goes around collecting the lost souls of orphans.

Something that Jason had been quick to rectify was Peter's small level of embarrassment about the room he'd been staying in. It's small, but Jason had lived in and had *seen* worse, and he didn't like how Peter was waiting for Jason to make a comment about it. The kid only relaxed when Jason started asking about what to grab and what not to.

It'd be another time, when Benny wasn't hanging out in the doorway, for Jason to let Peter know that he *gets it*.

"Well, this *was* supposed to be temporary, but I didn't think you'd move up in the world *this* fast. Got any tips for me, or do you think I'm too old for that Brucie Wayne to take me in too, Pete?"

Peter smiles as he slings his backpack over his shoulder. Jason is grabbing whatever random stuff he can find and shoving it into a suitcase they brought along. He hadn't expected Peter to have so much stuff, but it sort of makes sense. He not only got that POB of stuff from them (Jason is a fan of the jacket, and Peter had looked like a plant in the sun when Jason told him that), but he's also been here for a month, trying to build whatever the hell contraption that Jason pulled out from under the bed.

Peter had compacted it down when Benny wasn't looking. So Jason takes it that he's more than a little good at this kind of thing, which means he really *does* fit in to this family.

"I dunno, Benny, you kind of look like one of those dogs that look like old men. That makes you charming. Maybe if I ask nicely, Bruce will let you come along. Just give him a big smile."

“Doubtful that would work as well for me as it works for you, Dimples.” Benny grunts, sharing a look with Jason that says he’s fallen victim to the little manipulator before too. He watches Peter as the kid collects his toolbox, nervously shifting every few seconds. “Don’t be a stranger, just ‘cause you’re rich now.”

“Like I could ever forget to come bother you.” Peter smirks, zipping up his backpack. “And who else in this awful city would I trust for a burger?”

“You’re paying, now that you have the money to spare.”

“Benny... how you wound me so...” Peter clutches the fabric over his heart as if he’s been shot.

“Marie wanted you to take a couple sweaters that she knitted.” Benny ignores his dramatics. “And Pogo mentioned that his fridge is working fine now, so he’s hosting his house warming party next week. You should try to stop by.”

These are names Jason hasn’t heard about from the kid. But Dick isn’t the only one that went over the records of everyone in this neighborhood when they found out Peter was living here. Marie LeFontaine is an 78 year old woman that lives in the house down the street from here, she has four grandkids that stop by every now and then, all clean. Pogo isn’t a name he’s heard, so it must be a nickname. Mentioned a house warming party, so who’s new to the neighborhood again...? Ah, John Craffin, maybe.

“Miss Marie didn’t have to do that, I told her I had some new jackets...” Peter frowns as if the time spent on him wasn’t worth it.

“You built that ramp for her house for free and you expect to not get something in return? It’d be a shame on her record. I’m pretty sure Marie has been the head of this street’s knitting group since she was a baby. She made me a scarf when I was passing out free food in the last Mr. Freeze attack that left the neighborhood shut down.”

Ramp? Jason hadn’t looked *that* far into her records.

“The city should have got her one like they told her they would.” Peter says, looking through his notebooks at his desk.

“Oh, and those kids down the street will wanna know where you’re going too. They stopped by a few before you got here to tell you the mural got put up.” Benny tells him.

“It did?”

“Yeah, your idea for the petition went really well. They’re excited to show you.”

“I’ll have to check it out before we leave.”

“Oh, and-” Jason is starting to think that the ‘oh, and’s aren’t gonna stop. “-Yvette wanted to thank you for fixing her porch light.”

“You know I’ll be visiting, right?” Peter chuckles, putting the last of his notebooks in the suitcase. “Bet I’ll be here next week, even. Jason promised to sneak me to get burgers.”

“No I did not.”

“You will.” Peter sounds assured in that. Jason rolls his eyes, but he can’t find it in him to be annoyed about it. Jason also thinks he’s losing that battle. He wonders if Alfred might have the most trouble yet with this one.

“I’m just sayin’, you’re gonna get busy.” Benny shrugs like it isn’t a big deal, but the old man is definitely worrying like it is. “You’re gonna be doing stuff with your new family. Probably rich people bonding activities- I heard Brucie went on a cruise a few weeks ago with his kids just for the hell of it, in the middle of the school year, but whatever, that’s still bonding stuff. You’re gonna be having so much fun, you might not visit for a while. We get it.”

Peter hesitates. Jason can see his gaze turn from normal to washed over in an instant. ‘*New family*’ takes up all the space in the room. He still has that grin on his face like everything is fine, but his eyebrows furrow like Dick’s do when he’s sad.

And doesn’t that just eat away at Jason? To not know what to say to that, or what to do to help him with it? Jason’s never been good at this kind of thing, no matter what Big Bird tells him. The comforting people part of the job always felt out of reach, and it’s even worse when he doesn’t have a mask to hide behind.

“I’ll take this down to the car, if that’s everything.” Jason pats his shoulder to get his attention, giving it a little squeeze of reassurance. Peter snaps out of his stupor to blink up at him, and he nods with a vague smile.

“Yeah, thanks, Jason.”

Benny steps out of the doorway to let Jason pass by, suitcase zipped up and in hand. He gets about halfway down the stairs before stopping, right after the loudest of the creaky steps to give an illusion that he’d left.

It’s morally okay eavesdropping, okay? Don’t judge him on this. Jason can’t let his nephew stay *sad*, and he has to make sure that this convo with Benny is actually gonna help, somewhat, if Jason can’t say anything. So what if he’s lurking on the stairs? Peter’s just gonna have to get used to this family’s weird version of boundaries.

Okay, he heard that last part, and he knows how it sounded. But trust, this is still morally okay. There’s not a single duffel bag involved, so it’s fine. And if anything, Jason is the least of his worries. Tim is the biggest weirdo of them all.

“I can’t promise that life won’t get busy, but I can say that I’m not gonna stop hanging around so I can go do rich people stuff.” Peter tells Benny, a half hearted joke in between a sincere tone. “I can’t tell you how much having you around helped me out. I don’t know where I’d be if you hadn’t offered this room.”

“Dead, probably.” Benny grunts, but it’s hardly got a bite to it. “Or telling more people to shoot you.”

Excuse Jason?

“Oh, come on, Ben, I only did that once.” Peter’s voice tightens, and Jason wonders if he caught what he called Benny just now. “And- you know- I knew Lanky wasn’t gonna shoot me.”

Isn’t that one of the two criminals that Dick and Damian spoke about? They were on the train with Two-Face, and according to Dick, have the strangest friendship with the kid. Damian had said that they hadn’t wanted to give Peter the time of day and were acting like he’s bitten them before, but Dick said when he caught up to the two of them when looking for Peter, they were suddenly ride-or-dies. Should Jason be looking into them?

“*Lanky*? What, you givin’ out nicknames to people who try to rob you, now? Way to make me worry about you even more than I already have to be.”

Peter laughs at that, like it might be an inside joke. “He’s a friend, now, I didn’t think to tell you about that. Met him again recently, he and his friend are doing better. No robbing burger joints or anything! Nickname just kind of stuck... It’s just a habit I think I picked up from my- my Dad. I think.”

He knows that Peter isn’t talking about Dick when he refers to his dad. Not just because Jason’s never heard Dick consistently call people nicknames other than family members, but because they are probably nowhere near close enough for ‘Dad’ to be tacked onto Dick’s name just yet. That hurtle is about five after the hurdle of ‘acknowledging blood ties.’

So Tony’s a nickname guy, huh? Jason wonders what else Itsy Bitsy picked up from this mystery mentor from another universe.

“Thanks, Benny. Really.” Peter tells him, voice soft.

“Anytime, Peter. Even if this room finds another person to house while you’re away, I’ll figure somethin’ out if you end up wantin’ to come back. Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Though I gotta say, if there’s one person you could trust, it’s Brucie. He gives a shit about us, y’know? He might be some rich schmuck, but he’s a Gotham child just like the rest of us. Kinder, though.”

Jason doesn’t stick around to hear more. Probably because Peter would maybe tell that Jason was eavesdropping (He keeps forgetting that the little twerp can do that.) and also probably because it’s actually getting emotional and Jason can hear Dinah scolding him about pulling this stunt. And he’s convinced she has a sixth sense for this kind of thing, so any longer of this and she’ll be able to sniff out Jason’s guilt the next time he sees her.

He makes his way back downstairs and out the closed restaurant, towards one of Bruce’s cars that he parked outside of the burger joint. What? Jason wasn’t about to bring his motorcycle if they were picking things up. Besides, the Old Man would have stopped him if he really

didn't want Jason to steal it. And the look on Peter's face when he got to see the garage full of expensive, classic cars, was well worth it.

He's putting the suitcase in the trunk when someone clears their throat. He turns around to spot a gaggle of tiny someones standing on the sidewalk, waiting for him to notice them.

A couple of the kids are nervously hiding behind each other or ready to book it at the first sign of trouble- Gothamites are Gothamites from the day they're born- but the leader of their little pack- the shortest, but likely the mightiest of them- is daring to look him in the eye.

Jason can't help but smile at that. He closes and then leans one hand on the trunk, raising a brow at the... what, 12 year old? She has her chin stuck up courageously, black hair cut short to her chin. Her bangs are pulled back by several colorful clips, the most prominent being a yellow butterfly. What's more interesting are her clothes-they're new because there aren't any holes in them, but they look recently scuffed.

And isn't *that* odd?

This kid sticks out in their group, and not just because of the strange dynamics at play here.

She gives him a once over, trying to be brave about talking to him, but there is a cautious lean to her step, ready to book it if Jason attacks.

"What's up, Rugrats?"

"You came in with Peter." The little girl says. Instantly, Jason's interest pricks at her accent. It's deliberately thick, like she's trying to make it a point. Could be just because she's talking to an adult, and wants to sound tougher than she is. But the pre-scuffed clothes, the accent...

Something about her reminds Jason of Tim.

"Astute observation, Tommy Pickles."

The girl's brows furrow in confusion, maybe a little annoyance. "My name is Maps."

"Oh, forgive me." Jason raises a brow at her. "How could I have guessed *that* wrong?"

"Is Peter coming down?" She ignores his clever retorts. The other kids, despite being hesitant, are eagerly awaiting Jason's answer.

Jeez, Peter was here for a month, right? When did he have time to adopt a bunch of kids like some Bruce Wayne in the making?

...Probably around the same time that he apparently started making his way into a familiar face of this neighborhood. He wonders if Peter is even aware that that's what happened. He's got people asking after him, wanting to know if he's okay, knitting him sweaters. Apparently in the times that the Bats did take their eyes off of Peter, he was building ramps for old ladies and their wheelchairs, fixing people's fridges, and helping kids get murals painted on walls. There's probably a boat load of other things that weren't mentioned, that Peter would take no credit for whatsoever.

The kid just seems to be *like that*. From what Jason had read in Spider-Man's file on the BatComputer (specifically, *after* he found out it was Peter), Spider-Man wasn't just leaving his mark by saving people from muggings or stopping car accidents or running after rogues. He was helping people fix up a playground in the Upper East Side, he was finding lost dogs and cats, he was talking to teenagers that were having bad nights. He helped one little boy find his way back home when he tried running away. Several people actually told Red Robin that Spider-Man swings by to check on them and ask if they need help.

As much as they try to do the same, Gotham is a cursed place. The problems that rise up and threaten to overtake them each time they get comfortable leaves them barely any room to breathe in their suits. It's a little easier in civvies to make impacts on the community.

Peter is the type of kid to not even see just *how* big of an impact that leaves, especially in Gotham.

...Jason also considers how Alessandra is like that, too.

From what he saw on the research Tim compiled about her, she's a firefighter in the Tri-Corner. She comes from a large Italian-American family that's lived in Gotham for two generations, but *isn't* involved in the mafia, which is a statistical *wonder* in Gotham. She went from Romano to Romano-Esposito after marrying Giovanni Esposito, and she has a daughter named Teresa. There was a stint of her life where she had been injured in one of the last Firefly's attacks and she lost her memories for a while, but she came back stronger than ever. She looks so nice and normal in every aspect of her life that they thought *something* must be wrong with her, but she doesn't have a lick of a criminal history.

And she looks *so much* like Peter. Acts like him, too.

Was this what Peter's parents were like in his home universe, too? Did they get enough time to pass that down to him? What about that Ben and May of his? What were *they* like? Jason would have loved to meet them, to sit down for dinner and see if their light looked anything like his brothers.

(But his brother is dead, in Peter's universe. Dead, left behind a kid. He had a wife and a whole different family. What were they like to him? Had they been kind? Had they been able to help Dick grieve his parents? Had they all cried when Dick had to apparently change his name? Did they mourn the Graysons with him?

Did they hold him? Did this Ben, his brother's different brother, take care of him? What was it like for Dick to be the little brother, not the older one? Did he even know Jason? Did he know Babs, Tim, Steph, Duke, Damian, Alfred? Did he have Bruce? Or were they all separated, strangers to each other not just in name, but in existence? Or, did his family not exist at all, and Dick was the only one of them?

Was he happy? Did that version of his big brother even get the time he deserved? When he left Peter behind, did he get any time to mourn the life he lost?)

"He's coming down, yeah. It might be a second, he's saying bye to Benny." Jason answers Maps, ignoring the inner turmoil. Her eyes light up and another kid pumps his fist with

excitement, but then she tilts her head in confusion. “How do you all of you know him?”

“Peter helped my Papa fix the broken steps to the community center.” A boy volunteers, apparently no longer nervous. “He’s really super cool! And he’s Spider-Man’s friend!”

“We gotta tell him we made an A on our science project!” One girl chimes in.

“Why do you have a suitcase?” Maps questions, suspicious eyes on the trunk. Observant, isn’t she, this strange little girl?

“...Peter’s moving in with me.” Jason tells her.

Instead of frowning like the other kids, Maps puffs up with all the vigor of a protective dragon in a near instant.

“And who are *you*? Where’s he going? Are you normal? How long have you known him? You’re not CPS, are you? Because then we’d have to fight you. Do you have a criminal record? If so, what for? If you don’t, what’s wrong with you that the cops like you? Is this your car? It doesn’t look like it belongs to you. Is car theft on your criminal record? Does Peter know you have a criminal record? Does Peter know you stole this car? Did you make Peter steal this car? How old are you? You look like you’re forty five. Are-”

“Are you going to let me *answer* questions or am I just supposed to sit here?”

Maps snaps her mouth shut, cheeks puffed up as if physically holding her words in.

“I’m Jason. He’s going with me and my family. I’ve known him about a month. I’m not CPS. You would lose a fight, Pipsqueak, so don’t get into one. I don’t have to tell you my criminal record. This is not my car, it’s my Old Man’s. I am not forty five, and telling people they look old is rude.”

“Who’s your family? Who’s your Old Man? I still think you’re old-”

“Bruce Wayne.” Jason grins at the way her eyes bug out of her head. “That’s my Old Man.”

“You’re lying.” Maps breathes out, suspicious. Her friend, on the other hand, with zero hesitation:

“Whoa! Peter got Bruced!” He slaps another kid’s arm to emphasize his point. The other rubs his shoulder with a pout. “I told you! He’s really nice, like that Grayson guy! And that Timothy guy!”

“It was only a matter of time...” Science Project girl sighs, all melancholy.

“What was only a matter of time?” Peter opens the door to Benny’s, the bell chiming. He has his backpack over his shoulder and a Benny’s to-go bag in his hand that looks laden with food. The kids’ heads snap up to him quick as the Flash, and Peter raises a brow as he lets the door close. “I was just gonna come see you guys. What’s going on here? You’re not pestering Jason, are you?”

“You’re leaving *forever!*?” Maps squeaks at him. Peter’s eyes widen in surprise, and he glances at Jason for answers. “This old guy said you’re leaving forever!”

“Not once did that come out of my mouth, Cartography.” Jason flicks the back of her head. She smacks her hands over the spot and glares at him. Jason can’t help but laugh- she’s like a particularly pissed off bird, and again he’s reminded of Tim.

“I’m not... leaving forever.” Peter tells her, smile sort of thin. Jason and he both know that Peter *could* be, because at any point, this could all be resolved and he’d get back to his home universe. “I’m just going to go live with the Waynes.”

“You got adopted by Brucie?” One boy asks.

Peter shakes his head. “No, no. I, uh-” It’s at this very second that Jason realizes something. Dick and Peter were supposed to go over a backstory for this exact scenario. But if Peter was told about the parent thing and didn’t get the chance...

“His cousin.” Jason fills in. It’s the only story that makes sense, really. A long lost cousin, rather than Dick being a teenage parent. They could have just said they weren’t related- but anyone looking at the two of them side by side would be able to put two and two together. It’s easier to say they’re related and just have really strong genes on that side of the family.

“Yeah, my cousin. He’s taking me in.”

“...Bruce Wayne is your cousin?” One girl does *not* believe him at all. She looks pointedly at Peter’s tan skin, and then looks around like she’ll find a billboard with Bruce’s pasty face on it. “How far related are you?”

“No, *Bruce* is not my cousin.” Peter snorts.

“Dick Grayson?” Maps guesses.

Okay, damn, *incredibly* observant child. Hadn’t even seen them side by side yet and she’s got them clocked. Peter reaches over to ruffle her hair, then fixes it for her almost immediately.

“Good guess, Maps.” Peter’s compliment makes her stand up straighter. “I’ll be coming back to visit when I can. Don’t worry about that, okay?” Peter tells them, but mostly looks at Maps. She is their little pack leader, after all, and the most worried about him. After a moment of apparent telepathy between the two, Maps pouts but nods slowly in understanding. Peter smiles at her, and it brings out a smile in Maps as well.

“Okay, so show me the mural that got put up?” He’s pulling open the to-go bag, and he doesn’t even have to look at their hungry faces before he’s handing out burgers to them. Maps takes the last burger with a lot of admiration on her face.

The kids hurry up the street, Maps hand-in-hand with one of the younger girls. Peter is surprised when Jason walks with them, the two of them at the far back. But like hell Jason is leaving Peter alone anywhere. He hadn’t wanted to *before* Peter lived in the Manor, and now

that they have the excuse to always have at least one person with the kid, Jason is secure that he won't get easily kidnapped on their watch.

Another point for the Bats vs Tony: they wouldn't let that happen.

They walk in silence for a little bit, the noon-traffic slow enough that they could actually talk if they wanted to, which makes the silence feel thicker. The kids are none the wiser, chatting away to each other, waving to some adults they know as they get closer to the community center a couple blocks over from Benny's.

Finally, Jason finds something to talk about that isn't the elephant in the room.

"So how fast did they get attached to you?"

Peter shrugs, kicking a rock on the sidewalk. "I passed by them a few times while I was getting to know Gotham's layout, and we talked a few times, made sure they had somewhere to go. Spider-Man pointed them in my direction after some bullies broke their science project. I didn't think they'd be that sad to see me go."

"Course they would be," Jason says it without thinking about it. "You're a good kid, Pete. They don't have to know you long to want you to stick around."

It's not until after the words have left his mouth that Jason thinks that it hits close to home. Something twists in his chest, as Peter stops mid-wave at a neighbor to look at him, something vulnerable in his expression that reminds Jason too much of how he felt when Bruce said he cared about him and Jason knew he meant it.

He hasn't known Peter that long, none of them have. But they got attached to him anyway. He just fits right in with them all, like he was always meant to be there, sitting at the table. He even filled out that last room on the second floor that's always empty- besides Jason's old room, that neither he nor Bruce can bear to walk into. A staple of the Wayne family wing, a part of their tree that they don't want to cut off.

Jason doesn't want him to leave. The Wayne family has a hard time saying goodbye. The ones that they do have are always bitter, or filled with heartache, or come far, *far* too soon. Saying goodbye is something they've all had to do. But to know the people they're saying goodbye to will never come back...

He can see the second Peter decides to file that away. He turns to watch where he's walking, hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched up, feigning a relaxed posture. Jason didn't want *that* to happen, and it eats away at him. Kids should not have the ghosts of trauma on their faces. They should be *happy*, free of the burdens that come with life. He wants to say something to make it- better? More right? He doesn't know if that applies here, because that's what Jason *feels*, and he doesn't want to take it back.

Turns out, he doesn't have to say anything. Peter bumps his shoulder into Jason's arm as a recognition of the words they don't have yet. Relieved that nothing's too far from reach, Jason sets his arm around Peter's shoulders.

“Look, Peter!” Maps shouts from up ahead.

She’s pointing at the wall of the community center facing the street, the biggest, proudest smile on her face. The mural is there in all it’s glory, people pointing to it as they pass by, taking photos in front of it.

Spider-Man and Damian’s Robin are swinging together over the *Upper East End Community* sign. Robin is *actually* grinning, cape pulled back in the wind like bird wings, grapple in hand. Spider-Man is above him, arm reached out for another web. Somehow, it doesn’t look like it’s from Gotham despite it depicting a Gotham vigilante (and another that people should *think* is a Gotham vigilante, because they would be none the wiser).

The colors are vibrant, bold in a way that’s not neon, but rich and eye catching. Whoever painted this had put a lot of thought into that, into the small details of the webs on the corners of the wall, on the wind under Robin’s cape, of making the lights on the painted buildings in the background look warm and bright.

Peter stops walking, eyes wide like that wasn’t the image he was expecting. And sure enough, Maps shyly admits, “It’s not the garden flowers that we originally wanted to put... But we thought this was better. It makes more sense. The Robins always start their patrols in the East End, but this Robin stuck around longer...”

“And Spider-Man is ours now too!” One kid adds excitedly.

“Who- Who painted this? It looks amazing.” Peter’s grin is very real.

Maps shakes her hands out as she talks, absolutely beaming with Peter’s reaction. “Well, when we got approved for the mural, we went around asking if anyone knew any artists that would want to work with us, and that’s when we met Miss Florence! She owns that art shop down on Baker street, you know, the one with the cat? When we told her our idea, she said she and her daughter Analetta like Spider-Man too! She’s the one who painted it.!”

“Robin stopped by last night to help too!” Science project girl informs them.

“Oh, *did* he now?” Jason is never going to let the Baby Bat live this down. Never, in a million years, *ever*. That must have been where he escaped to for a few while they were on patrol last night. “That must have been pretty cool. Was he nice to everyone?”

“He was! Maps was *freaking* out.”

“I did not!” Maps’ face flushes bright red.

“Did too! She’s a Robin super-fan!” One boy hits her shoulder with a cheeky grin. “And Spider-Man now too, she’s the one who remembered their suit designs enough for Miss Flo to sketch out.”

“I just think they’re neat!” She protests weakly, toeing the ground with one foot shyly. “You really like it?” She asks Peter, hopeful.

“It’s seriously beautiful.” Peter looks up at the mural. Jason wishes he could read the kid’s mind sometime. It should be impossible to look so sad and so happy at the same time. “I bet Spider-Man likes it too.”

-

NOV 3

Peter is not pleased that Alfred has him on recovery. Bruce doesn’t need to be a mind reader or have a sixth sense in order to understand *that*.

As frustrated as Peter is, he hadn’t tried to sneak out yesterday night to go gallivanting off on patrol without anyone knowing, like one Timothy Drake-Wayne or Damian Wayne, when they get the gall to do so. Nor does he defy Alfred in any way, shape, or form. He’s a perfectly polite kid, saying his thank you’s and please’s, and he doesn’t argue about the food.

(Not that there’s much to argue *about*. Alfred might be British, but the man can cook a damn good meal. Peter isn’t unsatisfied with that aspect, and he shivers less often now that he has two days of nutritious meals and several snacks helping his body catch up. Alfred has it all down to a science, and by the end of the week, there will be a difference, that’s for sure.)

He’s not fighting it, but he’s not happy about it either. Peter had wanted to go out on patrol last night, but Alfred has given him another couple days before he can do anything. It’s a standard that they all have to deal with. Stephanie herself is grounded from patrol (Alfred’s, not Bruce’s, fault) until her stab wound won’t reopen. Bruce hadn’t been sure how that would go down, because Peter is a very independent kid. But he must have some sort of understanding with Alfred, if he’s willing to go along with it. Or maybe he knows that his body needs the proper food in order to be strong.

Or, the third option: he is not immune to Alfred, just like the rest of them.

No matter what the reason, it looks like Peter has found a way to occupy himself while waiting the recovery period out.

Bruce walked into the BatCave about an hour ago to find Peter sitting at one of the workshop tables. He was typing away at a program on the computer, notebooks and tools scattered about in front of him in a haphazard mess that was likely a system only he would understand. For a split second, it was like Bruce was looking at 14 year old Dick as the kid learns a new coding technique that Babs had taught him. Tongue stuck out the side and the same concentrated furrow of the brow and everything.

He doesn’t want to hover over Peter’s shoulder to find out, because he’s learned by now that the others don’t appreciate that. But he also can’t see from where he’s sitting what is on the computer screen, and Bruce is pretty curious to see what’s got him so worked up. Because the BatCave is in a state of calm, the way it is before everyone arrives to get ready for patrol, except for Peter’s little corner of the workshop.

Dick is up on another level with Jason, the two of them sparring together. Damian is checking his utility belt and restocking what he needs. Duke and Tim are a few steps away, working on

a robot that Bruce is at least 90% sure is designed to steal their shoes. He won't tell the others, but mostly out of a curiosity to see how many they can steal before someone notices. Peter has pulled his legs up on his stool (which should not be a comfortable way to sit at all), and as the minutes pass by, he grows more and more upset.

That isn't a change from what he's been doing the last two days.

Like he said- Peter is not happy, and Bruce doesn't need to be a genius in order to tell. Like his father, Peter is wrapped up in a lot of emotions, and he has the same coping mechanism: pretending everything is fine.

He thought that hanging out with Jason for pretty much an entire day would have helped some to clear his mind, and at least make it less awkward between him and Dick somehow. But things are never *that* easy, he should have known better.

When Peter isn't smiling and talking to everyone like nothing happened, the kid scowls when he's lost in his thoughts, or his face shuts down any emotions whatsoever. He's basically a mirror of his father- who, at the moment, is haunting the halls of Wayne Manor like he died a hundred years ago and his afterlife is nothing but grieving. And when they do manage to be in the same room, Peter avoids looking or talking in Dick's general direction. He isn't *ignoring* Dick, per say, just avoiding eye contact like it might actually kill him. That, or he finds any excuse to leave the room.

Unfortunately for Dick, his usual excuses come from Damian, of all people. Bruce doesn't know how they clicked so fast, but he's grateful for it. Damian will sense the discomfort, or Ace will alert, and he'll make up a reason to bring Peter somewhere else.

"I'm feeding the turkeys." (This had been met with Peter's delight.)

"I'm going to watch the Housewives." (Bruce has never known Damian to admit that he watches this show. Apparently, it became cool when Peter said he also liked it.)

"Alfred the Cat has a new sweater that just came in." (Damian took a thousand photos and sent his top 40 to the group chat. Peter was in a few of them, as well as Damian, and Bruce spied Dick's home screen has a new wallpaper with them both.)

It's great that the two get along, but Bruce is getting worried about how long Dick can last like this. And it's only day two.

Peter is currently in the state where he's not shut down or pretending he's fine. Whatever it is that he's working on over there, it has him muttering under his breath and angrily scratching away at his notes.

Bruce is pretending to be focused on maintaining a grappling hook when Peter huffs, turns the computer all the way around to face the corner, and says, "Time out for bad codes."

Tim snorts at that, looking away from the wires in his hand. "What'd the code do to you?"

“Existed.” Peter practically hisses. He picks up his backpack off the floor, shoves his arm inside, and pulls out a wrist band. When he sets it on the table, he presses a hidden button on the side and it uncompresses. Peter unlatches the side and hooks it around his forearm, the screen lighting up.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Duke scoots backwards on his rolling chair and meets Peter at his table. He points at the tech, a fascinated gleam in his eyes, barely resisting the urge to make grabbing hand motions. “You’ve been holding back on me, Spider-Man? What is this?”

Peter, gently surprised, tells him, “It’s just something I’ve been using to detect Ohnn’s spacial jumps. Senses the pressure in the air, sort of works like a weather radar. I’m calling it the Jumping Radar until I figure out an acronym.”

“I like Jumping Radar.” Duke comments thoughtfully, eyeing the tech hard enough that Peter takes it off of his arm and hands it to Duke. Duke grins excitedly at this, already turning it over to see the smaller components up close. “It also sounds like ‘jumping spider’. Suits you and your theme.”

Peter perks up at that, some of his earlier dissent slipping away. “Oh. Really?”

“Really.”

“You know, that’s a *really* good idea, actually.” Tim sits up, foregoing his own work. He sets the wires down, gazing up at the ceiling before deciding to scoot his chair backwards like Duke had. He observes the Jumping Radar just as closely as Duke is, hovering over the tool and having to brush his hair away from his face. Peter glances between him and Duke, leaning forward eagerly like a kid listening to a story. “How accurate is this, you think?”

“Pretty accurate?” Peter guesses. “It gives me a few seconds of notice before he appears, which is enough right now. But it’d be more accurate if I could figure out how to import it into the nanite tech.”

That doesn’t just catch Tim and Duke’s attention; it also catches Bruce’s.

Bruce’s blood runs cold, trying to tell himself that it might mean something different for Peter. Nanite technology is used to affect the biological systems of metahumans, in this world. Not something that is pulled out casually in conversation, like Peter referred it with. It could take away their powers for periods of time, used in experimentation.

He hadn’t forgotten that Peter’s powers meant that he had been experimented on. And when pulling his blood when he was in and out of consciousness after Firefly, they had gone through several different needles before Peter stopped reaching over to break them and had stayed passed out.

“You use nanite tech? Isn’t that dangerous?” Duke, the only powered person in the room besides Peter, is rightly uncomfortable with that.

“What? No, why would it be? I mean, unless it gets in the wrong hands, maybe? But they’d have to be able to work out the interface, and no one can use it without Tony giving an

override. Or me, I guess.”

Peter pulls up his sleeve to show off the bracelet that’s always around his wrist. He pulls it back when he wears those clever webshooters of his, but it’s always there. The metal shines, inconspicuous. Alfred had kept Peter’s tech separate from the rest of his clothes, and Bruce recalls the bracelet had been set away from the tech.

“I don’t use it, but Tony does. His Iron Man suit is made of his nanite technology. Before Ohnn brought me here, Tony was able to send this to my wrist. I wanted to see if I could take the Jumping Radar and put it into the nanite tech, but what I’m wanting to do won’t work until I can create an AI more advanced than HAFI or Little Legs. They can’t even self generate right now because they’re not connected to anything.”

“Okay, okay, I have a ton of questions now, because that’s nothing like I thought you were about to show me.” Duke sits up, putting both his hands in the air in front of him as he tries to think. Peter, oblivious to what they were all thinking, blinks at him. “Firstly, Tony is Iron Man, you mentioned that. But what exactly is his, uh, thing? I guess? His suit is made up of these nanobots...? Okay, scratch that question. *How* does this work? I need to know everything or I’ll die.”

“We were trying to hold off on asking you all about your universe but...” Tim doesn’t look the least bit guilty.

Peter grins when Tim hands him back the Jumping Radar. He sets it down, trying to find the best words to describe it.

Bruce has to admit that he’s been curious about this as well. Peter hasn’t mentioned much about his home universe yet, besides Tony and Loki, and apparently, a score of villains that he has. Bruce can’t help but wonder what this universe must be like, if there are counterparts between heroes, or if everyone there is different from here. There has to be *some* cross overs, if Peter is a hero there, and Dick is a hero here.

(His chest twists with a pain all too heartbreakingly familiar when Bruce remembers his son is *dead* in Peter’s world. Dead, and having an entirely different family. Bruce knew that alternate universes likely existed, and that realistically, there had to be versions where they didn’t all know each other. But another part of him hoped that in every universe, his family would be together, and in every other universe, they’d be happy, healthy, and whole. Even if it meant that he wasn’t there for them, and someone else was.

But even in a world where Bruce isn’t their family, he loses a son.)

“...Tony is the most brilliant man in the world. At least, in my opinion.” Peter tells them honestly. He has that comfortable smile that he gets when he thinks about his mentor.

“There’s plenty of other heroes that are smart, like Dr. Banner. But Tony’s field of expertise is engineering. He owns Stark Industries, the largest tech conglomerate in the world. Pretty much all of our tech is Stark-made, from phones to the big stuff like city-wide generators. The second biggest is OSCORP, but they’re nowhere near Stark level.”

Peter thinks on it for a second, glancing at Bruce. “Actually, I think it’s kind of like Wayne Industries. I guess, in terms of *‘being known world wide.’* I see a lot less people hate Bruce, though, so I think that’s where the similarities stop? Like, everyone knows that Tony is Iron Man, but no one knows that Bruce is Batman.”

“Everyone knows? Like, in your cape community?” Duke leans back in his chair, contemplative.

“Oh, ew, you call it a cape community?” Peter actually winces. Tim’s brows raise, a ghost of a laugh on his lips, but Peter is already apologizing. “Sorry, that was rude. We don’t get a lot of heroes with capes in my world. You guys would like Thor, I guess. And, uh, no. It’s not just our heroes. It’s everyone in the world.”

That sounds so monumentally stupid that Bruce almost forgets to *think*. He doesn’t even pretend that he’s not eavesdropping on their conversation anymore- it’s just that *that* was so much of a slap in the face to hear that he couldn’t sit idly by. “You’re telling me *everyone* in the *world* knows his identity? How is that even safe?”

Peter side eyes him for a second without answering. When he does, he admits, “It’s complicated.”

“How did he get found out?” Tim asks before Bruce can. This might be the first time they get real information on Tony, and now that they are, Bruce is wondering how Peter didn’t get kidnapped *sooner*. If Bruce came out as Batman, his entire family would be at risk within the hour. And here Tony is adopting a kid into a situation like that? No sense of privacy?

Alright, a bit hypocritical. Bruce’s kids are always in the spotlight despite how much of the press is scared of him, Clark, and Lois. But it’s a different level of threat when it’s asking villains to show up at your doorstep.

“He sort of... told everyone?” Peter laughs. Bruce *does not* find it funny, not even a little bit. “He got kidnapped in Afghanistan by some terrorists. They wanted him to build a Jericho missile for them” *Jericho missile*? “-but he instead built the Mark I Iron Man suit. Which was really cool because he was, like, dying from shrapnel in his chest and he was in a cave and had basically nothing to work with.” ??? “He stopped Stark Industries from manufacturing weapons when he realized how much damage they were doing, fought his ex business partner who also had a suit? And SHIELD was all like, ‘you gotta have a cover story’ because that’s, like, all they do, ever. And Tony is gonna Tony, so when he was on live TV for his press conference, he just told everyone he was Iron Man.”

...Bruce can not wrap his mind about that.

Not the part about the backstory. That... is whatever. He’s used to insane backstories like that, so he’s stopped asking questions even if they nag at the part of his brain that wants to know more. But the part where Tony was *explicitly advised* to have a cover story by what sounds like an organization that involves heroes, and he went ahead and did *the exact opposite of that*.

He would never let Peter know it, because he really was trying to like or at least understand Tony after realizing their mistaken assumptions, but...

“So, his Iron Man suits are made up of nanite tech. Which is *not* nanobots that go into your bloodstream.” Duke clarifies.

“Yes- wait what?” Peter does a double take.

“You said it needs an AI to work? What exactly *are* nanites, in your world?” Duke asks, likely sensing that they were about to go down a rabbit hole. Peter squints at him, wanting to press for more, but leaves it be for now.

“They’re microscopic machines that build off of each other to make larger structures. They’re powered by an internal energy source, but to give it commands so that it can reconfigure itself and the like, I would connect it to an AI.” Peter reaches into his hair, and when he brings his hand back down, there’s a thin spider on his finger. It looks like a harvestman spider, but it has a thicker abdomen.

Duke jumps back with a horrified screech, Tim leans forward with interest. Peter tilts his head and snickers at Duke’s reaction.

“The AI would have to be more advanced than Little Legs here.” The tiny spider reaches its front two legs out towards them, and Duke groans, pushing Tim in front of him. “He’s not gonna *bite* you, Duke. He’s a bot, not a real spider. And even if he did- which, again, impossible, he doesn’t have pinchers- it wouldn’t hurt. Trust me, *I’d* know.”

Bruce is glad that Peter finds humor in that, but Bruce does not. Again, it’s more questions that Bruce wants to ask, but knows he has to hold back on. Bruce is not... comfortable, not knowing the information needed about this other world. He’s hoping that once Peter gets settled into Wayne Manor a little more, he’ll be up to answering the questions that Bruce has.

Like how he was bitten by a genetically mutated, *radioactive* spider, and no adult noticed. Or if they *did* notice, and that’s why Peter is cagey about telling people.

“Little Legs has to be the cutest name for this guy. You made him?” Tim peers at the AI. Bruce can see the cogs turning in his mind, and he huffs with amusement knowing that Tim is going to want to learn more about this so he could perhaps make his own.

...Bruce should be worried about Tony and Tim meeting.

“Yeah, with Tony’s help.” Peter’s amused grin starts to fade into something bittersweet as he thinks more on it. “We made him and HAFI together. But that’s all the AI I’ve done so far... I was attempting to try and make at least HAFI, because he was rudimentary enough that I could maybe work off of him, but it’s a lot harder without Tony. He’d know what to do better than I could.”

Ah, that must be where his annoyance from earlier came from. Bruce glances at the computer that is still in time out at the same time Peter does. Peter is giving it a glare like it personally was keeping Peter stuck in their world.

“And there’s no way I’d be able to create a FRIDAY all on my own. I’m actually far more into biochem like my dad was than I am with engineering.”

...This time, the referral to ‘dad’ isn’t attributed to Tony, is it? So Dick’s counterpart worked in biochemistry? Bruce would have never considered it, but he supposes that’s because Dick is more into the engineering side of science in this universe, so there’s a bias there. While Tim has a lot more focus on computers, Dick actually has a talent in building and designing.

Peter tenses when he fully considers his own words. He doesn’t acknowledge what he said, and the topic is still far too fresh for anyone else to want to press him on it. ‘Dad’ is a taboo word at the moment.

“We should put the Jumping Radar around town.”

Peter, halfway through trying to convince Duke to hold Little Legs, glances up at Tim. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t be out in the city all the time, nor can you be two places at once-” Bruce doesn’t miss the narrowing of Tim’s eyes that always accompanies him when he says ‘*debatable*.’ “-so we could place other Jumping Radars around Gotham. It could collect information, too, and we could start to see where he appears most often.”

“That’s... really smart.” Peter admits, scratching the back of his neck.

“We could also try to help you with the AI, if you’d like?” Duke offers, a hesitant thing. “Tim and I both are into coding and stuff. And Babs, too. Actually, no one beats Babs at this sort of thing. It might not be this FRIDAY you mentioned, but...”

He trails off when he sees Peter’s face. He’s returned to the ghost of himself, turning away from them while trying to plaster a grin on his face, but looking far more pained than it should be. Bruce wishes he could say something to make that disappear, but he knows there’s not a lot *he* could say that could make the pain stop.

“Yeah, maybe.” Peter replies. Bruce watches as Duke’s gaze turns softer, but determined. Like he’s just made up his mind about something.

“In the meantime, you need a break from your current project.” Tim grabs Peter’s stool. Without getting up from his own chair, he begins dragging Peter backwards towards his and Duke’s workspace. Bruce shakes his head at the sound of the stool scraping the metal floor, and Tim is lucky that Alfred wasn’t here to scold him. “Remember that robot we talked about before?”

“You mean when you were stalking me and then Steph kidnapped me to Batburger?”

“Yeah, that one. I’m making you another accomplice.”

-

Damian enjoys a good challenge.

The League was nothing but challenges, nothing but trails and tests, nothing but sacrifices for the sake of his Grandfather. Damian had spent nearly his entire soul for them, trained away all of the love he could hold. “Love” made people weak, made them foolish and irrational. It was something that was reserved for the riffraff of the world, the ones that were not destined for greatness.

Love was for little kids, and Damian was not given the privilege of being a child. He was always a weapon.

Well, Damian also wasn’t allowed to have an identity in any way, shape, or form. The challenges that he actually enjoyed- which were puzzles, mysteries, questions of life- were stripped away for what was more “useful.” The League was full of expectations that Damian could not escape. Not until he met his family.

Losing Father so soon after meeting him, after only just getting to see a glimpse of who he was, and then being forced to grow without him there, left a stitch in his heart that will never truly be repaired. But at least when they met again, Damian had learned that love was not a weakness. That life was more than the weak and the strong. That it wasn’t just being nothing before you were here, being nothing after, and being set to have a purpose in the meantime. He was someone that he actually wanted his Father to meet and learn about.

It was all thanks to Richard that it happened.

He had a terrible habit of seeing right through the walls that Damian set up to protect himself and seeing the hollow, vulnerable parts that were left behind. Damian owes the person he is now to Richard and his patience, his never ending faith of wanting to do more, to *be more* for people. Following in his footsteps felt more right than any lesson that League had ever taught him, and not once was he met with pain when he failed to meet Richard in the next step.

There were no raised fists, no locked, dark rooms. No fresh wounds on his back left to bleed and stain his shirt. There had only been compassion, understanding, and a willingness to stay. Perhaps that’s why Damian can not sit idly by as he witnesses one of the most important people in his life go through a trial that he can not walk alone.

Though Damian will tell himself that it is merely because he likes a challenge.

The training section is on the first level of the Cave, with three rooms in total. There’s a larger platform where they do their warm ups before going on a patrol, where Timothy and Duke are at now, stretching and talking idly about their school work. There’s two sets of stairs on either side of metal bleachers that lead down into a sunken sparring room. This is where Damian is with Peter, sitting on the bleachers after Damian had gotten done with his own exercises. The sparring room is wide enough that they could run a simulation of most scenarios, but it isn’t as comprehensive as the actual simulation room that the Justice League has.

On their right, there’s a wall to wall (reinforced) glass partition that separates the sparring room and the weightlifting area. Father and Richard are there, chatting with each other. Peter

is pretending that he's looking around the sparring room with interest, but his eyes will glide over towards the weightlifting room, a thoughtful furrow in his brow when he foolishly believes Damian isn't paying attention.

"You know that staring at Richard isn't going to clear anything up for you, right?"

Peter, caught red handed, is upset for a brief second. Damian wonders if maybe this is the moment Peter decides he actually does hate Damian's abrasive nature, but then the boy just sighs, no fight in him.

"I dunno, staring is working so far."

"You could, I don't know, *talk* to him. Just a thought. Might be hard for you to have, but you'll get there if you actually try."

"There's nothing to talk *about*." Peter insists. Damian scoffs, because that's the boldest lie that he's ever heard.

"There's *plenty* to talk about, you just don't *want* to, like a coward. You mentioned before that you have a habit of avoiding tough conversations and you appreciate my bluntness? This is me being blunt. Can't get any more clear than this: You're getting nowhere at a spectacular rate. Unless this is about you not knowing where to start, then perhaps I can help. How about you write the topics down, throw them in a hat, and I'll pick it for you so you can *get it over with*?" The other boy huffs at that, as if the notion of talking about anything is inconceivable. Damian rolls his eyes, turning from stretching his legs to face Peter. "You're avoiding him."

"And you've been *helping* me avoid him." Peter grunts back. He puts his chin on his hand, elbow on his knee, and is making a huge show of not looking in Richard's direction.

He's got Damian there, he *has* been doing that. "I was giving you a grace period and time to reflect. Richard does it all the time. That's what he's doing now." Peter turns his gaze back onto Damian, something calculating in his eye. Damian presses on unabashedly. "It's been three days where you've been given time to think about it, and even today, you had the Manor to *yourself* and Alfred while we were at work or school. Meaning uninterrupted access to your thoughts."

Damian had tried to get *out* of going to school, for many reasons. Mostly because he thinks it's pointless, considering he has written five doctoral theses and his teachers are as stale as saltines left out for days and as blank as a fresh printer paper, so they teach him nothing of value. But another reason being that Peter would likely hate being left alone all day. Sort of like how Ace needed Titus, because as well as he gets along with Alfred the Cat, Ace needed a companion that could keep up with him.

He had not gotten out of school, and when he said exactly that to Father, the man had just seemed amused more than helpful.

"I thought you liked Richard."

Peter sits up straighter, brow twitching with annoyance. "I *do*."

“Then why are you avoiding him? He wants to help you just like the rest of us do.” Damian hadn’t caught the ‘us’ until it was out of his mouth. But it’s too late now to take it back, and unlike his brothers that would have pointed it out to tease him, Peter doesn’t acknowledge it.

“I *know* that he wants to help. I’m not a moron. I *get* that part.” Peter sounds more upset than Damian is likely meant to understand.

“Then what don’t you get?”

Peter doesn’t reply. He just chews his cheek, stewing in his emotional turmoil just like the rest of their dramatic family.

And with that, he can practically *hear* everyone’s voices in his head, telling him to back off for now and try again later. What Damian wants is to see Richard happy, and Richard would be happy if Peter and him were not at odds at the moment. But Peter can not come forward until he gets over whatever it is that is bothering him. However, Peter can’t get over what is bothering him if he doesn’t talk to Richard. And Richard is giving him space so that they don’t talk, which is making him sad.

It’s a never ending circle that frustrates Damian to no end.

Damian understands that this must be a lot to be alright with. Losing his parents, whatever happened in between, and then getting to an alternate reality where they’re both alive. But that’s just it- they’re both *alive*. They may not be the parents that Peter was supposed to have, but isn’t this a golden opportunity? To be able to learn about his parents in some way? Or is it really that painful to see Richard’s face?

The question is forming on his lips before he can stop himself, but Peter cuts in right before it.

“Does this room go through simulations?”

Missed opportunity. He’ll try again at a later date like originally planned. “Yes. There’s a similar room in the Watchtower and some other League locations. Do you have something similar in your universe?”

“FRIDAY and I run through simulations every Thursday so I can ‘develop problem solving skills and critical thinking’, whatever that means.” Peter recalls. He cranes his neck to see the top of the room, where the generator for the simulations runs. “And you guys have a Tower also? What’s yours like?”

Now *that* piques Damian’s interest more than talk of simulations. He sits up, trying to think of which question to ask first. Damian had gotten such an annoying earful from his family for his questioning at dinner (which he does *not* understand, because the conversation was going to happen anyways, and they learned something from it, and Peter wasn’t upset about it), that he was biting his tongue about any more questions about Peter’s past. Just so that he won’t get another damn lecture.

“The Watchtower is a secret Justice League base that orbits Earth. Your... Avengers. *Tt*, what a weird name for a hero league.” Damian complains, and Peter raises a brow as if to say ‘*And you’re any better?*’ because he has no taste. “Your Avengers have a Watchtower?”

Peter shrugs, leaning back on his elbows on the bleacher behind him. “Not a Watchtower. I don’t think we have bases floating around Earth or whatever. But then again, SHIELD is picky about telling me anything. Or, really, telling *anyone* anything.”

Damian is about to ask what SHIELD is, but Peter continues on.

“I live at the Avengers Tower, in Manhattan. It’s not top secret though. It used to be called Stark Tower, but now that the Avengers live there, it’s gotten a new name.”

“Your Avengers all *live* together?” Damian thinks that would be a recipe for disaster if they tried that here. The dynamics between all of the cape community is ever changing and hard to care about. “Don’t you all have your own cities to take care of?”

“That does sound a little out there.” Timothy’s voice joins them. He’s already sitting down behind them on the bleachers, Duke well on his way to tagging along. Peter isn’t surprised that they’re there.

“It’s not *exactly* like that? Pepper and Tony live there, ‘cause like I said, it used to be Stark Tower. We live there full time, and so do some of the others that don’t have their own families and stuff. Most of my mentors live in the Tower and sort of cycle around from place to place. Really, the Tower is more of a headquarters that everyone has the option to stay at. Spider-Man mostly sticks to Queens, ‘cause that’s where I grew up, but I travel around Brooklyn and the other parts of New York too from time to time. We have our own places to be, but it’s not like the others have *specific* cities. They go where SHIELD asks them to, or if their own shit comes up.”

“So your Avengers aren’t self-sustaining? You keep bringing up this SHIELD organization.” Duke points out.

“The Avengers were formed by SHIELD, which is an extra-government anti-terrorist organization. Things are kind of... testy, right now.” Peter hums in thought. “A lot of people don’t like mutants or enhanced people. They think we should be regulated more because of how many villains tear shit up, and that’s where SHIELD came in. They formed the Avengers during an alien invasion, and they just kind of stuck around. It makes people feel better to have a group formed for that specific purpose.”

“So, who all is on the team?” Tim asks. “Iron Man, you, and who else?”

“There’s at least one assassin.” Damian crosses his arms.

That causes Tim and Duke to look at him in mild surprise, but Peter grins as if he’d been waiting for Damian to bring it up. “And how’d you know that? Guessing by statistics?”

“You were trained by one. I wouldn’t miss that.” Damian replies. “Though you do not kill, your movements are precise and pointed when you do go in for an attack, but you use mostly

use evasive techniques that are similar to what the League of Assassins would teach.”

“I *knew* you were trained by an assassin, you walk *just* like Miss Natasha does.” Peter turns around to face Damian fully on the bench. “Actually, most of you do. But my spider-sense puts you and Miss Natasha in the same category.”

“Natasha?”

“Natasha Romanoff. She’s the world’s most talented assassin, the Black Widow. She’s one of my mentors, and a founding member of the Avengers.”

“You know, I’m sensing a theme in the naming here.” Duke points out. “Iron Man, Black Widow... Spider-Man is kind of like a mash up of that. Does everyone have to have ‘man’ or a spider related thing for their name?”

“Hey! Spider-Man is an *original*! At least I’m not named after a traffic direction.”

“My name is *symbolic*!”

“Excuse me that I don’t know your lore.”

“You hadn’t asked!”

Peter pauses, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “You know what? You’re right, I’m sorry. It’s better than Copyright over here.” He jabs a thumb at Timothy, who scoffs in offense. “What *is* your lore?”

Duke claps his hands together, happy with his success. Before he can tell him, Timothy butts in. “Excuse you?”

“Don’t ‘*excuse me*.’ You’re named after a restaurant! Doesn’t exactly inspire the fear of justice into people.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“No, no, he’s right. Even without the apparently real restaurant that he has in his universe, didn’t you name yourself after one of Jace’s old aliases? Or was it Dick’s before that? I can never remember. Because y’know, you guys *love* not having your own names.”

“Duke gets it!” Peter sounds like he’s been waiting for someone to say it. “I’m still hung up on Superboy, and the fact that you guys have all shared a hero identity. And now you’re telling me there’s *more*?”

“*Duke* was a Robin, by technicality. He was literally the leader of the We Are Robin movement. He’s talking out of his ass right now.”

“*Wait... Peter...*” Duke squints at him. “You don’t-”

“If you’re about to ask me if spider silk comes out of my ass, I think I’ll have to punt you across the room.”

“Fair enough.”

Damian feels that itch of wanting to know *more*, the same that settles on his skin when he’s found a particular complex puzzle. He tunes the others out, trying to place why this *Natasha* and the spider-sense intrigues him so much.

When Damian had first seen that video of Spider-Man that Cassandra sent to them, he had wanted to know everything about him. He saw the techniques, yes, but he also saw how fast they were executed. Peter has an ability to change direction- both literally and physically- in the blink of an eye. He’s fast on his feet and to change his plans. He’d attribute this to Peter having contingencies like Father, but by his own admission, Peter ‘fucks around and finds out.’

But despite the questionable method, he makes it work. It’s that training that he received that works so well with Peter’s spider-sense and his other natural abilities. Peter has the strength to hold up a building, but he favors speed, agility, and preciseness more than that. And Damian wants to know how it *works*. He wants to see just what this other assassin would teach their student, wants to see what is similar and what is different, wants to see exactly what Peter does with it.

Because Damian likes a challenge, he asks:

“Peter, do you want to spar?”

Whatever the losers were talking about comes to a halt mid sentence. Peter tilts his head, and for the first time in a couple days, he looks *excited*.

“You want to? How long before you guys go on patrol?” He glances at Timothy, but he’s already standing up, so they’re going to do it no matter the answer.

Damian stands as well, though because he’s going to suit up soon, he’s already in his leggings and undershirt, ready to spar. Damian crosses over to the sparring floor while Peter hangs back to take off his hoodie. He continues to wear the long sleeve shirt and his web shooters- Damian has noticed that Peter doesn’t ever roll up his sleeves or uncovers his hands on his own decision in front of others.

“Uh, about thirty minutes.” Timothy answers. Of course, his elder brother is just as curious about Spider-Man as Damian is, so he has no objections either. “Dami, you need a cotton wrap.”

“Tt, as if I wouldn’t have them on me.” Damian pulls out the gloves from his legging pocket.

Peter hurries over to stand in the center of the room with Damian. The sparring floor is as wide as a basketball court, with markings for different purposes. There’s a line that splits it in half. Peter chooses to put his back to the weightlifting room, and Damian faces that direction. In the center of the court where they are standing, there is a circle that they use for wrestling and boxing matches, to mark where they can’t leave the ring. Peter, observant despite being hard headed, looks at these lines as Damian puts his gloves on.

“Are we keeping inside the ring?”

“Depends,” Damian puts his hand on his hips. “When you usually spar, what are your rules?”

Peter hesitates, and then gives Damian a goofy, sheepish grin. “Don’t be stupid?”

“Should have figured.” Damian sighs. “What do you usually do when you spar with this Natasha?”

“How about you guys just stick to regular sparring for now?” Timothy offers from the sidelines. “You’re gonna want the time to cool down before we go out, so stick to whoever gets pinned or knocked down first.”

Damian looks to Peter to see if that’s good for him, and the other teen shrugs with acceptance. Damian levels into a starting position- leaning on the balls of his feet, arms on either side of him so he can be prepared if Peter will strike first or if he’ll have to do it. Peter only remembers to do this when Damian does it, but his posture is much more laid-back, more defensive than offensive. So it’ll be Damian who strikes first.

And that he does.

He knows that Peter can handle this- he held up a building, after all- so Damian doesn’t hold back. He moves forward fast as a viper to swing at Peter’s face, putting actual effort into the swing that he’d avoid with the others. Peter sidesteps the move faster than Damian can blink, twists around to get behind Damian, and sticks his foot out to trip him.

Damian’s ankle catches on Peter’s. To stop himself so he doesn’t hit the ground, he places his palm flat on the floor and cartwheels back up to his feet, just at the edge of the ring. Peter has an easy going grin on his lips, as if he expected that much.

That was *remarkably* fast.

It’s not that Damian underestimated Peter. After seeing the other teen keep Batman on his toes, always out of reach, and then managing to steal the cape off of his back, Damian would be stupid to think that he’d be an easy fight. But it’s one thing to watch it happen to someone else, it’s another to see it up close.

He narrows his eyes, choosing to dig his focus in more. He should think about it the way he’d spar with one of the speedsters- thinking ahead, anticipating their moves so Damian is not having to play catch up the entire time.

This time, Damian goes to a lower punch towards his stomach. Peter ducks around his arm, but Damian swings back his elbow towards Peter’s head. He misses yet again, however, because Peter has bent back to avoid it. Damian drops low and sweeps his feet under Peter’s legs as he’s fallen back.

Peter jumps up to avoid it, flipping back twice and dropping into a crouch on the ground, just at the edge of the ring. It’s a move that Richard would pull on them, thinking himself funny.

And of course, Peter's grin matches it.

The other boy goes first this time. He kicks off to go at Damian head on. Damian side steps to avoid the hit to his stomach, but Peter surprises Damian by suddenly turning mid way and grabbing the back of Damian's shirt. He swings Damian around the ring and releases him once he gets the momentum, trying to get Damian out of the ring. Oh, like *hell* he's about to let that happen!

Damian toes the edge of the line. He has to spin on one foot and use his other to rebalance himself. He scowls when Peter laughs, already hearing how much distance he put between them before he even turns fully back around.

"What's that face for?" Peter smirks.

"Quit grinning, it makes you look stupid." Damian retorts, but he can't help his own small grin. It's just satisfying when someone is *competent* in a fight. "You haven't beaten me yet."

Damian pushes off his foot to go at Peter. He decides for a right hook- Peter dodges. While behind Damian, Peter spins around to kick at Damian's side. "What, I'm not allowed to have fun?"

He avoids the kick, turning to swing his own leg up to kick Peter's head. Peter rolls forward to avoid it and pops back up just as fast.

It continues like that, a dance between them where neither of them manage to land an actual hit. Though he's sure that Peter *could*, if he was actually serious about this and it wasn't just a spar. They're both more focused on getting the other to step out of the ring in order to claim a victory. It becomes like a dance, almost, one that they lose time to. Peter will quip something off hand when the silence gets too much, and Damian will retort every now and then.

It's not until Richard calls out to them that they snap out of it.

"Five minutes to suit up, Dami!"

There!

Peter hesitates when Richard speaks, glancing back at the bleachers in surprise. Richard and Father are standing next to Tim, Duke, and Stephanie, watching the spar intently. Damian goes to kick Peter out of the ring while his focus is shot.

Except Peter's hands reach out to grab Damian's ankle, fast as a shot- far faster than he's been the entire spar. It was more like a reflex than a conscious movement, and Peter's eyes widen as if that's exactly what it was. His focus back on their spar, Peter kicks out to trip Damian's other foot right as Damian tries to get his ankle out of Peter's grip. Damian loses his balance. The air whooshes around him, and Damian finds himself laying flat on his back.

When he sits up, he looks down to see that he's out of the ring, and Peter stands over him, distracted by glancing at the weightlifting room and back to the bleachers.

He hadn't noticed that everyone was there. It's not like Damian had either, but Peter has a real problem with that, doesn't he? Always needing to know where everyone is in a room, and getting tense when he doesn't.

That *can't* just be from that spider-sense of his. Damian knows that look isn't just because it was Richard that had spoken. He's the exact same way. Though nowadays, Damian finds the Manor a comfortable place, and he doesn't itch when he isn't aware of where everyone is, that had not been the case when he first arrived. The League had trained him to constantly be aware of his surroundings, even when he should be safe.

It was a lesson that Richard had talked to him about once. How it wasn't just something that the League consciously trained into him, but also a trauma response. Damian used to be scared that someone was going to hurt him if he wasn't aware.

Who did that to Peter?

"What the hell was that?" Damian brushes himself off. Tim and Duke are already bounding up the bleachers to go get suited up for patrol, and Stephanie is speaking to Bruce. Richard is glancing over at the pair on the sparring floor, but is trying not to say anything.

Peter snaps out of it, and reaches his hand out to Damian to help him up. Damian takes it, finding that Peter is shaking his head as if to clear away his thoughts. "What was what?"

"That grab at the end." Damian says. Peter must have expected to talk about the *other* thing. But Damian finds that bringing it up when he could just make sure to help Peter feel safe the way Richard had done for him would be shameful. "You looked surprised that you did it."

"Oh," He laugh lightly, coming back to himself. "Well, I *was* surprised. It was a reflex."

"A reflex." Damian repeats.

"Yeah. Sometimes I can't control it. Most times I can't." Peter holds out his hands, just looking at them. "It just happens when I'm in danger. I almost kicked the shit out of Bruce that one time, but I managed to stop it when I recognized there wasn't a danger. *That* could have ended badly."

"Your body just reacts like *that* without your conscious thought?"

"Yeah, it does. Dodging bullets before they fire, catching things that are thrown at me, stuff like that. My spider-sense is always aware of my surroundings." Peter explains to him. It sounds true, even if it is insane. Damian wonders just how far that can go...

"Dami," Richard calls out again, much closer this time.

Peter tenses and looks over his shoulder at him. Richard smiles warmly, though he's still hesitant around Peter, like one would be for a spooked deer, and there's a twinge of sadness to it that doesn't settle well with Damian.

"That was a good spar, you two." Richard tries, and Peter nods without a word, looking away from him and messing with the velcro of the gloves on his hands as if he ever actually takes

the gloves off. Richard winces. “Um, Dami, we really gotta suit up. B might take off with Tim if you’re late.”

“I am *not* letting that fool take my patrol route.”

-

NOV 5th

“*Fourteen!*”

“*Yeah, well, I have fifteen, so suck on that, Bird.*”

“*No you do not!*”

“*Yes I so do! You’re just mad ‘cause I’m in the lead!*”

Tim thinks that maybe he should have considered Jason’s offer to help chaperone the kids after all. He hadn’t anticipated just how much this game would tire him out...

Maybe *he’s* getting old too, like Dick?

It’s Peter’s first night out back on patrol, and he hadn’t accounted for how much energy Peter would have, and how apparently, Damian *feeds* off of that energy now. Like some kind of energy vampire. No, actually- they encourage *each other*, in a never ending cycle of swapping a singular braincell between the pair. It might have only gotten worse after the spar, because now every time they get the chance, they’re doing something like this, and they’re starting to build games with unspoken rules to them.

Like, when Tim and Duke got home from school, they had caught up with Peter and asked how he was doing while in the kitchen, just shooting the breeze as they all avoid the elephant in the circus tent. Damian got home after them, stalking into the kitchen with a plan. Without even a greeting, he had *thrown at knife* at Peter’s head, which the other caught with far too much ease. Peter wasn’t surprised, either- according to him, Damian had done it sporadically throughout the morning while the demon brat was getting ready for school.

After that, they had sparred again downstairs, and ran through a few simulations. Tim would check on them every now and then to find that they had developed some sort of telepathy, because while they weren’t *quiet* (Peter makes sure of this, because he always has something funny to say), they were getting through the simulations without a word to each other about what to do. They just *did* it, working together like they’d been doing it all their lives.

It’s actually a little terrifying how well they picked up on that. Bruce had watched them for a few minutes during the last spar, and he had gravely told Tim, “*That’s a dangerous pair.*”

Terrifying, but impressive.

Alfred hadn’t been too happy to hear that they let Damian and Peter spar, something about how Peter was on rest, but the kid looks perfectly fine to Tim. Either way, Alfred had lifted

the grounding tonight. And no one commented on Alfred's amusement when Peter cheered about that, then sped off to get ready with Damian.

Tonight is a haze of games and speed running patrol, but the night before had been largely uneventful.

Tim, Damian, and Bruce were investigating Ohnn's last known steps in Gotham, which was honestly *too long* ago for it to make them feel easy about his absence. Adding Peter's knowledge of Ohnn's movements along with what they had been tracking, Ohnn did have a sort of schedule: three days, three nights, for the most part. But it's been long enough since the last time that Ohnn appeared for that schedule to be reliable anymore. That, or he's been able to cover his tracks now, and that wouldn't be good either.

When looking through the night that he disappeared, they had discovered that Ohnn had visited The Iceberg Lounge.

What Ohnn and his mystery partner could want with Cobblepott is to be determined, but it's more likely that he went to the Lounge for another reason. Which would be much more welcomed, because Penguin has a nasty habit of covering his tracks too well. Tim isn't looking forward to sneaking through their records.

Tim had put up listening devices in some new places two months prior (Cobblepott's hench-
goons had found the ones that were previously in there before, but Tim thinks he got creative enough that these should last longer), so they had listened in on a good-old-stakeout for a while. The only part of the entire evening that was worth noting was that *apparently* some fear gas containers went missing from several shipments that someone bought, and one mafia family is blaming a rival for it.

Bruce had to call Jason about it, since the two particular mafias had their hands dipped in around Crime Alley, and one of the families was currently on Hood's List. This is a comprehensive list of people that Do Not Want To Fuck With Hood. *Fear Gas* being apart of their shipments and them having a record of helping Crane in the past to terrorize Crime Alley kids means that Jason is going to be putting the fear of god into some of them tonight.

Since Jason was out doing his thing, and Dick and Cass were out on patrol together without Tim (Cass had kissed Tim's forehead and told him that no, it was just going to be her and Dick tonight, but maybe next time), Tim had thought that he'd be with Bruce, Peter, and Damian.

But Bruce had decided at the last second to go with Jason instead, and tasked Tim to watch over Damian and Peter.

Of course, Tim had to say yes. He didn't have to say anything for Tim to know that Bruce was likely going to look at the fear gas lead, because Crane being out and them not knowing about it would stir trouble none of them want. Jason had looked over at Peter and Damian pushing each other and loudly shouting about something stupid, looked at Tim, and given a rare: *"Do you want help with that, Baby Bird?"*

Jason offering to give up a lead in Crime Alley, when *Bruce* was going?

Tim should have taken him up on that, seriously. It was clearly a warning. (More accurately, Jason probably didn't want to spend that time with Bruce alone, and him not wanting to let Peter out of his sight).

But he had gotten it into his head that they'd just be placing the Jumping Radars that Peter had built in his free time, and there was no need to bring four people to do that. Besides, it'd keep the teenagers busy! No problem, Tim could handle it. He has the experience of wrangling Bart, Kon, and Cassie.

(Ignore that Tim also had to be wrangled sometimes. It's not relevant at all.)

Except now they started a game of putting up their Jumping Radars faster than the other can, and even Tim, expert watcher, has a difficult time trying to keep an eye on them. Tim has decided that it's better for him to hang back, look at the GPS, and then go double check where they put them and that they're properly put up, rather than try to keep up with the two of them. If he tried, he'd get an aneurysm or something.

And he sounds like he's complaining, but it *is* actually kind of fun.

Being able to see Dami act like a kid and not a miniature adult is always interesting and heartwarming, and seeing Peter have the time of his life on patrol with them feels great too. Peter being cooped up in the mansion doesn't fit the kid at all, and no doubt he's been itching to get back on the streets.

"There's only two left for Spidey, and three left for Robin. Then that's it for this district." He informs the pair. "I'll buy the winner an extra scoop of ice cream at the end of the night."

"Might as well give up now, Bird." Peter taunts. Tim hears him both on the comms and above him, so he looks up just in time to see Spider-Man swing overhead. Damian is somewhere a few blocks over.

"You're gonna eat your words, and I'm gonna be eating victory."

Peter lands next to Tim on the roof, showing Tim his empty hands, clear of any of the small, bug-like devices. With Spider-Man's mask still being repaired and Peter in the domino, the smirk on his face is plain to see as he tells Damian, "Well, you better hurry, then. I'm getting hungry."

(He looks so much like Robin, he looks so much like Robin, he looks so much like-)

Tim laughs. Peter had lied about having only fifteen JR's left, so Damian would still think they were competing and rush around. Looks like Peter is the winner this round, but that trick might not work a second time tonight. Tim turns his comms off and Peter follows suit, coming to sit down next to Tim on the ledge.

"Having fun, Spidey?" Tim asks, though a part of him is still distracted.

With that domino on, looking at Peter makes Tim feel like he's nine years old again and running around Gotham with his camera, desperate to get a picture of his favorite hero. The

only difference is that Tim never got a chance to sit next to Dick like this when Dick was still Robin. He'd only ever had the chance to see him from afar through the camera lens. Always a spectator, never sitting at his side.

Even now, when Tim actually *can* sit next to Dick, he's still a spectator. Still the three year old that watched the Flying Graysons soar through the air in that circus tent. Tim has never stopped watching, and he doesn't think he ever will.

Crazy how things come full circle. It was that watching that made it so easy for Tim to see Dick, to see Robin, through Peter and Spider-Man.

He shouldn't have kept it to himself, the dimension thing. He knows that wasn't his best course of action, but Tim hadn't just kept it to himself because Damian had annoyed him. (Though, that was still a big reason). Tim had actually been looking for evidence that he could be right, so that no one could call him crazy.

It was that reason that he hadn't said anything. "*I didn't want to be called crazy.*" is actually a sore spot in the house, even a year later. As great as they all are getting along, and as much progress as they made...

(Like, Bruce actually wanting to... *go places* with him? Not just working, not just at the Manor, but doing something, just the two of them? The last time they had done that, it was before Jason attacked Tim at Titan's Tower. Tim thought it would be the *last time*.

And Dick, his big brother, acknowledging that the communication between them had crumbled a long, long time ago, and wanting to fix it? Again- before the Titan's Tower, Tim and Dick had been very close. If Bruce wasn't Tim's father, he had at least been assured that Dick was his big brother, was his family. That hadn't *changed* after the Tower, but it had felt... different. Tim is a liar, at heart, and a coward. Always a spectator.)

...With as much progress as they made, some part of Tim still feels like the 17 year old that dropped out of high school and left everything and everyone behind to go looking for Bruce, knowing that he couldn't call for help or quit, because everyone thought he was *crazy* for thinking Bruce was alive. Especially Dick.

So he... he just wanted proof. Before telling anyone. But if he had said that, it would have come with another heart-to-heart that Dick didn't have the energy for and Tim really didn't want from anyone else.

"It's *way* more fun to do patrol with other people!" Peter swings his feet as he talks. "I don't really have anyone to do that with! All my mentors are busy doing their own stuff, for the most part, so it's just me. Unless Black Cat wants to join in. Sometimes she doesn't wanna steal and she just wants someone to hang out with. Which I get, cause sometimes I just wanted someone to hang out with too."

"Who's Black Cat?"

"A thief that I've been trying to catch." Peter shrugs as if that didn't make Tim's brain short circuit.

“What?”

“She’s *really* stealthy, but I’m sneakier than her so that’s not what makes her hard to catch. She has a luck manipulation power, *that’s* what makes her super hard to catch, ‘cause my luck is very, very, *very* bad. She didn’t even need to tell me for me to know that. She’s my age, started stealing, like, last year? Maybe a little longer. Or... *professionally* stealing. She’s a kleptomaniac, she’s probably been stealing since she was a toddler.”

“Holy shit,” Tim breathes out a hysteric laugh.

His mind flashes with the amount of times he had to find anything to do so he could avoid Catwoman and Batman being all lovey dovey and gross on the Gotham rooftops. And all the times he’s heard Dick and Jason complain about the Will-They-Won’t-They phase that they had when the two of them were Robin. And a part of Tim’s mind can not compute that Peter has *his own version of Catwoman?*

“What?” Peter doesn’t get it.

“Is...” Tim does not know how to word this. How do you ask if your nephew has a crush on a girl? That’s *awful*. Tim is terrible at emotional conversations, and romance, specifically. When he has a crush, he would rather ball it up inside of himself and lock it away in a deep, deep void that no one can look at. “Is... Black Cat... a *lady* friend?”

Peter stares at him, probably blinking behind the mask. “Her pronouns are she/they?”

“I meant- Like- Ugh. Do you have a crush on her?”

Immediately Peter gags, horrified enough to recoil away from Tim. “*Eww!* No! I think we both would rather *die!* *That’s* what you were asking? What is wrong with you?”

“Sorry, sorry!” Tim barks out a laugh, and Peter huffs with frustration. “It’s just- Batman has a cat burglar named Catwoman, and they’re actually a couple. Ish. It’s complicated. Just wanted to see how similar you two might be.”

“Don’t put your heteronormative shit on me. Guys and girls can be just friends. And *don’t* compare me to Batman. My hyphenated name makes me ten times cooler and more sophisticated, thank you very much.”

“You’re right, you’re right.” Tim concedes, hands up in surrender. It appeases the little brat well enough. “I just had to ask, for the reality correlation of it all. So Black Cat, she’s your friend, but also a rival?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I just find it hard to want to stop her, sometimes, ‘cause I hate the people she steals from. Like art smugglers, and stuff like that. She also likes stealing from plain-old-rich folks and even though I stop her, I sort of think they wouldn’t *freak out* over a vase getting stolen. They have plenty left to share. Though she did get me caught up in a scheme once and I was wanted for art theft for a couple months before it got cleared up. Was annoying at the time but now it’s kinda funny.”

“You’ve been wanted for art theft?” Tim asks, and Peter shrugs. “Huh. Me too.”

“Really?” Peter leans forward. “What’d you steal?”

“There was a... misunderstanding, in a foreign country, about a year ago.” Is all Tim has to say about that, at the moment.

“Oh, well, you know how misunderstandings go.” Peter sighs dramatically.

“What about other heroes your age?” Tim can’t help but think about the other hero possibilities. “What are they like?”

“What do you mean? It’s just me.”

Tim pauses to mull that over. “It’s... just you?”

“There are no other heroes my age. At least, not yet.” Peter says it like it’s fine, but his tiny frown shows that it does sort of bother him. “Black Cat is the only other powered person I’ve met that’s my age. I guess that’s another reason why I don’t want to stop her and give her up to the cops.”

Tim thinks about the period of his life where it was just him and Batman. Dick had taken the effort to come around, but for the most part, Tim was the only kid around at that time. Dick was an adult, after all, by that point, and Bruce was too. Besides that, Bruce and Dick couldn’t be in the same room very long without screaming at each other. It’s another reason why Tim never wanted to stay over at the Manor.

(There were a lot of reasons for that.)

Meeting the Young Justice had felt liberating. Cassie, Bart, Kon... They changed his life for the better. He was around Peter’s age when he met them, too. He can’t imagine hitting puberty *and* having no friends who were heroes to talk to about it.

“That must get pretty lonely.” Tim comments.

“Sometimes. But Ned makes it better.”

“Who’s Ned?” Hold on, Tim thought that he just said...

“He’s my *best* friend! He’s not a hero or a vigilante, but he’d make a *great* one, in my opinion. I met him at school, and we just clicked right away. He’s one of the coolest people I know, so I didn’t think he’d be my friend, but he is! I’d never really had a friend before Ned, so it’s really great to have him. He knows all about Spider-Man, and he’s kind of my guy-in-the-chair, when he can get away with it. His Lola is pretty strict and I wouldn’t want him to get in trouble staying up too late. But we break the rules a lot so he can talk to me while I’m patrolling.”

Peter could *not* sound more fond right now, like he’s all warm and gooey on the inside. He’s got the same dopey grin that Dick gets when he talks about Wally.

“Ssssssooooo....” Tim is not equipped to handle that, so he’s not gonna. “This is your first time patrolling with more than Black Cat?”

“Pretty much! Tony does it sometimes, but he prefers being in his lab.”

“I remember my first time patrolling with B and Nightwing.” Tim tells him, glancing at the GPS.

Looks like Damian is talking to Batman, and that’s why he’s taking so long. Are Bruce and Jason done in Crime Alley?

“What was it like?”

“It was *exhilarating*. I’d trained for so long before going out, y’know? And even before then...” Tim remembers the feeling of *flying* for the first time and how all the hard work paid off. “Wing always made it a point to go get food or to play games while we were out. He’s a *great* teacher too, I learned so much from him. I couldn’t get over how I was learning from the *original* Robin. It was like a dream come true.”

Peter hesitates, shifting where he sits like he couldn’t tell if he wanted to run or stay. Tim briefly worries that he fucked up by mentioning Dick, but Peter asks, “What... *was* he like? When- When he was Robin?”

Huh. That’s certainly not what he expected Peter to ask... But that’s kind of sweet, isn’t it? Actually, more than sweet. He’s so nervous, like he thinks Tim is gonna shut him down, but hopeful that he won’t.

Wanting to know about Dick is progress, isn’t it? Peter told them he was so young when his parents died that he didn’t remember them, to the point where it was hard to recall their faces. That didn’t just mean that they didn’t get to know Peter, but that he never got to know them. He likely has *only* ever heard about this alternate version of Dick from other people that got to know him. And now he’s come face to face with a version he might know *nothing* about, and he’s back to square one. His dad is a stranger again.

Well, it’s a good thing he asked Tim. He’s been watching Batman and Robin for a long, long time.

“He was abrasive.” Is Tim’s first words, which is probably a weird place to start. But Tim doesn’t want to tell Peter about Dick’s life story, that’s for the two of them to talk about. What Tim *can* do is talk about his perspective on him. “He just lost his parents when he became Robin. He was all jaded edges and fire, an anger that didn’t really ever go away. Grief does funny things to people. Like make them dress up at Bats and Birds.”

Peter’s laugh is breathy, like an afterthought.

“But the more comfortable he got with B, the more he opened up into... Some kind of light. Batman was the night, and Robin was the big, bright hope that Gotham needed. He grew into something you couldn’t look away from even if you tried. He was *all* stupid puns and quips, and he was also a hard headed kid, so people underestimated him. But he was able to keep up

with Batman, and actual super powered people. He's the kind of guy that people look to in a crisis to have an answer. He's most reliable of us because when he loves someone, he loves them so deeply to the point of his soul belonging to them."

And there he goes, from Robin to Nightwing without really thinking about it. Peter is thoughtfully quiet, his legs have stopped swinging.

"He's much more patient than he used to be." Tim adds, bumping his shoulder on Peter's. That earns Tim the smallest of grins. "You know, actually, he's come a *long* way. One time when he was Robin, I watched him get fed up with Condiment King and try to shove his condiment gun up the guy's nose, only to fire mustard up his *own* nose. He had to sit out the rest of the fight cause he kept sneezing yellow."

"No fucking way." Peter scoffs. "There's *no way* this *ridiculous* city has a villain named *Condiment King* and his shtick involves mustard."

"Not *just* mustard. There's also ketchup and mayo. Honey mustard, sometimes, or ranch, if he's feeling fancy."

"You're lying to my face right now!" Peter swears, smacking Tim's shoulder.

"I'm not! He's a *real* guy! Just ask anyone else!"

"Fine, I'll ask them right now!" Peter turns on his comms, Tim following suit just in time to hear Babs fussing about something Hood did. "Oracle, Double-R is trying to make me think there's a *real* villain named Condiment King."

"*He's lying to you.*" She replies with absolute zero hesitation. Tim almost stumbles with the betrayal.

"I knew it!"

"Wh- I'm *not*! When we get back to the Cave, I'll show you!" Tim reels in the shock, because he really *wasn't* making it up, and with the amount of times Babs had fought the man, he thought she at least wouldn't put Tim on the chopping block like this.

"Yeah, *okay*, I believe you. Condiment King is about as real as Antman."

Tim narrows his eyes at the little twerp. "...You said he was real when I asked you."

"I dunno, Copyright," Peter sticks his feet to the side of the building with a cat-like smirk. "*Is* he real?"

"Spidey-"

"*Red, we need to hurry up and place the other Jumping Radars. Stop messing with Spider-Man.*"

"But I'm *not*!" Tim protests as Peter jumps off the side of the building. "*He's* messing with *me*!"

-

NOV 6th

Dick is not getting enough sleep.

One would think that with him taking off of work, Dick would have *more* time to sleep. But trying to sleep comes with not being able to shut his brain or his heart off, and Dick can't have any of that. So he finds himself yet again filling the should-be-sleeping hours with work.

It's at least a good chance to get caught up with the case files he'd been procrastinating for the JL. Bruce had been subtly (not) hinting that he should get that done before someone else has to do it and Dick gets a big stink about it. He flicks through a few of them now while sitting at the Batcomputer, signing off on non-emergent missions and updating the files that had been cleared already. His eyelids feel about as heavy as his heart, but he can't bring himself to close them.

Because every time he does, he sees how *haunted* Peter looked when he saw the poster.

Now *that* had been Dick's stupidest move yet- not having the conversation before entering a room with his parents and their names on a big paper. Peter had clearly been aware of that much about them, and he's not *stupid*, so of course he'd see it. But Dick had gotten caught up in his head about...

Well, that dinner.

When Bruce took him in, he *refused* to change his name. He hadn't even let Bruce formally adopt him until he was an actual, legal adult. He had always been Bruce's ward, and had always clung to his parents that he watched fall and leave him. Like if he was holding onto them now, the rest of them wouldn't slip away too.

Having the 'Grayson' in his name meant a lot of things. It meant a connection back to Haley's Circus, with all of his friends and family, that he had to leave behind. It meant that he was still there in some way, was still *their* kid even though they were all so, so far away from each other. Dick was in that big, quiet Manor, and the people he cared about and had known his entire life were on the other side of the country or the world. He would look at the poster on his wall with his parents on the paper, one of the *only* photos he ever had of them, and he'd pretend he was still sleeping in their RV, tangled up between his parents after a long day of practice or performing.

(Feeling safe. Loved. Home.)

He hadn't ever imagined a world where he would have done it differently. But then again, he never imagined a world where he hadn't had Bruce there to field his name out of the headlines, to keep him from getting harassed about his parents' deaths every day. Sure, he imagined a world where his parents were alive. But in the ones that they weren't (the reality), he couldn't picture anyone but *Bruce* being there that day.

Dick had been the circus kid that Bruce ‘took pity on’ in the eyes of high society. He was the golden child to the citizens of Gotham. He was the ‘Boy Wonder’ to the hero community. But no matter what, Bruce made sure that *his* name wasn’t brought up in papers. Clark and Lois do the same for all of them now. They could say anything they wanted behind closed doors, but if they tried talking about it in the news, life wasn’t going to go well after that.

“Richard Parker” was Peter’s father, not Richard Grayson. This was a version of him that had an entirely different path to take when his parents died. Had their deaths even been murder? Or was it really just a freak accident? Had he been meant to lose his parents no matter what? Were these Parkers supposed to take him in if Bruce hadn’t?

It was all too much and not enough information at the same time. And because he freaked out, he made a mistake, and now he can’t stop seeing how hurt Peter had looked.

“I’m tired.”

Dick drags a hand down his face with a groan, leaning back in his chair and trying to get past the way his chest twists with pain. It’s like a hot iron is being pressed to his heart. Those two words had sounded so quiet but so desperate, and Dick hadn’t had it in him to make Peter sit through that conversation.

And that’s because it wasn’t a conversation they needed to have immediately. Dick could wait it out, could be patient for this. Peter needs his space, but it’s starting to feel more like Peter *wants* to ignore his existence and be done with that, with Dick, forever.

If that’s really what Peter wants to do, is Dick capable of pushing him on it? Of forcing his way into Peter’s attention? How serious is the moral dilemma of telling Peter that he wants to know him, wants him to stay in their world? Dick doesn’t have a problem keeping his kid from an alternate universe (not even a little bit), but would Peter think of Dick as a cheap copy to his real father? An imitation? Even if he didn’t, wouldn’t it be cruel to get closer to him, because Peter is going to have to go home, back to where his Dad is *dead*? Is Dick hurting Peter by being near him-?

“Is this a bad time?”

Dick startles up in his chair, twisting around to spot the kid himself.

Peter looks like he wasn’t getting enough sleep either. His hair is stuck up all around like he’d had a fight with his pillow, his long sleeve shirt twisted around his torso to prove that he lost that fight. His red-rimmed eyes are drooping, half caught in his sleep, and his brows are furrowed.

Had he been crying? No- not a question. Peter’s eyes and cheeks are rubbed raw, he had *definitely* been crying. It looks like he just jumped out of bed and came down here without caring about changing or washing his face. He’s holding three notebooks in his hand, one foot placed behind him like he’s ready to run.

“Hey, bud,” Dick didn’t do it on purpose, but his voice comes out gentle, and he hopes the way Peter is frowning doesn’t mean he thinks Dick is patronizing him. Desperate for damage

control, he gestures to the computer halfheartedly. “No, not a bad time. I couldn’t sleep so I figured I’d work on some League stuff, but I hate paperwork.”

Peter’s grip on the notebooks tightens a little bit, but he doesn’t run away, like every other time that they’ve been in the same room for the past few days.

“You do a lot of paperwork for someone who hates it.” He comments.

“All part of the job.” Dick tries for a grin.

Peter raises a brow, and like a miracle, he must decide that Dick’s existence isn’t a reason to run away. He pulls out one of the other chairs and sits down next to Dick, though a little far apart, and sets his notebooks down. “I’ve never had to do paperwork. I don’t think Tony has, either.”

“Well, Tony can apparently afford other people to do his paperwork for him.” Dick only thinks twice on that comment after it’s out of his mouth- Peter has a history of defense on Tony’s part that doesn’t work well with Dick in the conversation- but Peter grins. An actual, *real* grin that’s aimed in his direction.

Small wins!

“I meant for hero stuff. Pepper gets him on the Stark Industries stuff.”

“Pepper is your foster mom, right?”

“Mm... technically.” Peter shrugs, opening his first notebook and pulling up one of Bruce’s files on one screen. *DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL*. “She and Tony aren’t legally married, but she lives with us and she’s pretty much my foster mom. She just doesn’t have any legal rights over me.”

“Does she have a sister named Salt or is that a nickname?”

Dick is trying to keep his eyes on his own work, because he’s not Bruce and he doesn’t hover over his kids’ shoulders just to see what they’re doing, but his eyes had already caught on to what was on the screen and he finds that he’s trying to read in his peripheral vision despite his better judgment.

It’s mostly just files compiled on all the known variants of dimensional travel and those who could go in between. Magic users, for the most part, but the reason it wasn’t a viable theory was because, well, shit goes astronomically wrong when dimensional travel is used. The Antimatter universe could cause explosions, looking at Hell could bring someone into irreparable madness... “Dimensional” travel had always been more about timelines or pocket dimensions, not a completely alternate universe, like where Peter is from. There may not *be* magic users in their world that could go between dimensions like that.

Or if there are, they are not on the heroes’ side. Or, it comes with a price- like Fate’s Helm.

Theoretically, Wally or Barry could do it, but they wouldn’t be able to bring Peter along with them.

Peter hasn't read the computer yet, he just grins at Dick's stupid joke. "It's a nickname Tony gave her. She sprayed him with pepper spray when they first met."

"Well, that's not concerning at all." Dick leans back again in his chair, trying to feign nonchalance, but feeling like he's failing. One would think with the amount of times that Dick had gone undercover, he'd be good at that, but apparently fucking not.

He glances down at Peter's notebook paper. There's not a blank spot on the page. His scribbled handwriting has the entire thing covered in even the small margins and around the punch hole with sequences that are familiar because Bruce and Tim had been working through the same equations on the Batcomputer. These are the ones that that Loki character had been working on with Peter.

The ones that are to help Peter get home.

There are *three* notebooks in front of him, two already full from front to back.

Something twists in Dick's chest again, and he has to scold himself mentally. *Obviously* Peter has been working on this. He wants to get back home. He deserves to go home.

"Have you tried running the sequences?" He asks, because no ugly part of Dick is going to rear its head and keep Peter from getting back to his family. (His family, not Dick's, because Dick might be his father but Peter doesn't want-) Cut that thought off.

Peter could run through the sequences in the simulator to see what works, basing his work off of Ohnn's. He's the only one who's gotten close enough to that bastard to see the tech up close, and he sort of has an idea on how it works, but not really. From what Peter's mentioned to them, before meeting Ohnn, dimensional travel through science and not magic was still theoretical. People are still using particle accelerators to try, not small devices put on their wrist.

"Sort of." Peter shrugs, scrolling through the file. "But I'm kind of putting it off. I was hoping to try literally anything other than that."

"How come?" Isn't the way he came the easiest way to go? Rather than searching for ways back through other means, other people, who might take longer to get him home, wouldn't it make more sense to take the same way back that he got through? It's already connected to Peter's world.

Peter holds one of his arms almost like he's holding himself, eyes not leaving the computer. Like he can tell what Dick is thinking, he says, "The other way hurts."

His breath catches in his throat. Peter brings his legs up to get even smaller in the chair, still scrolling through the file on the computer.

He had known perfectly well that Peter had shown up injured, that day at the library. Ohnn had tried to kill him, had beaten his face and strangled him. Peter itches at his neck as if recalling this as well, and Dick looks again at Peter's red, puffy eyes, the dark circles under them. He hadn't considered that the method that Ohnn was using would hurt-

But hadn't Peter hinted at it? *'Ohnn's method isn't pretty either.'*

He has to stuff down the roaring, almost murderous anger that rises up. He'll have to let that sit and stew in a deep, dark part of his soul, and save it for when he meets Ohnn face to face for the first (and *last*, because like hell he'll let him get away) time. Instead, he takes a silent, deep breath, contemplating what to say next.

"Are you okay?"

He hadn't known what else to ask. He could press about what it was like, he could push to know more about what happened, to know more about Ohnn. But Peter had brought down those notebooks after crying, and it had to be for the reason that it was on his mind. The most important question to ask is nothing less of how Peter is doing.

Peter looks at him, searching his face for who knows what. Try as he might, Dick can't seem to read the kid's mind. All he has is a vulnerable question in Peter's gaze that never reaches his lips.

He turns back to the computer. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a nightmare."

He wants to reach over and brush Peter's hair back, try to comfort him the way his parents- or Bruce, his father, after all these years- used to comfort him. Tell him something to reassure him that it's all going to be okay, to be at his side as someone to rely on. But he recalls Peter finding excuses to leave the room he's in, and he sees the distance between them now, and he has to force himself back.

Small steps, one at a time. Dick can't push farther than this, he might really come to regret it.

"I turned into dust." Peter says quietly, voice wobbly and his eyes wet, but he blinks it back, refusing to cry. "Tony tried grabbed my hand, but it wasn't there anymore. And it hurt a lot. I don't wanna do it again if I can help it."

Dust.

Peter hadn't said anything about how traveling by Ohnn's method must be like, before now, except for that one off comment. They know the details of the teleportational jumps, but... *dust?* If that's the case, then this method is likely stripping their bodies apart by the molecule, pulling them out of existence that way.

He pictures Peter crumbling into ash in front of him, and it feels like he can't *breathe*. This time, he reaches out to Peter despite the distance. As if to make sure he's still there, still all together in one piece, and that he isn't going to disappear, lost and in a pain that Dick can't prevent.

He doesn't pull him into a hug- the kid tenses like he's scared of that. But he does place his hand on the back of Peter's neck, scooting his chair closer. Peter leans into his touch the smallest bit as if holding himself back. He doesn't look away from his work, but he's not actually reading anything on the notebooks or the screen either. When Dick runs his fingers

through Peter's hair, the tension releases from his shoulders, and they settle into a quiet moment, just the two of them.

He's in one piece. He's not in any pain anymore. At least, *physical* pain. There's a lot to say about how much of a mental scar it left on Peter, if he's having nightmares about it. For *now*, Peter is okay, and he's not about to be gone, leaving nothing but ash behind. But it terrifies Dick to think there's going to be a moment in the future where he *won't* be okay. That Dick can't take away the unfairness in the world, can't save Peter from fate, from life and death.

Dick has seen horrors beyond the imagination. He sees the curse that has been placed on Gotham every time he goes out into the streets. He's seen people lose themselves and lose others, he's seen people lose their humanity, either willingly or while dragged kicking and screaming. He's witnessed the rise and fall of people desperate for love, for recognition, for sanity. He's seen people struggle with what it means to live and what it means to die. Inside of him will always be the kid that watched his parents' skulls crack open on the ground, and realize that he will never see them in whole again.

The world has never terrified Dick more than in this moment.

After a few minutes where they say nothing, Peter's eyes droop a little more as if he's fighting to stay awake. Dick blinks back hot tears from his own eyes, feeling much more awake than he had before Peter arrived. Peter turns to say something, but he stops himself before he can.

That's when he jumps to his feet, something unreadable about his expression. No- It's almost like he's *angry*. Peter backs away from Dick and he has to let his hand fall.

"Night." Peter is all Peter manages, leaving the room like someone lit a fire at his heels. The door shuts behind him and Dick feels like the room is ten times bigger than it was a few minutes ago.

"Night, Peter." He tries, but he doesn't know if Peter can hear him behind the door or not.

He doesn't know what he did. Peter hadn't indicated that he wasn't wanting comfort, but when he looked at Dick's face, that's when he took off. Dick puts his head in his hands, trying to run back through what just happened. Should he have done that? He didn't think it'd make Peter so frustrated, but... He pushed too soon.

Dick drops his hands, gaze falling back to the computer and the notebooks. He can't help but feel this bottomless pit of disappointment and frustration with himself. How come when it matters the most, Dick fails to reach the people he cares about? He got angry with Bruce and left without talking about what really upset him, his relationship with Bruce and Jason suffered for it. He thought he was doing well with Tim but he had kept *missing* things. And even with Damian, Dick was terrified that he'd miss something or he'd push him away without meaning to, and it's like a small miracle that nothing has happened yet.

He doesn't know what to *do* this time. He doesn't know what step to take to meet Peter halfway.

Dust.

It hurt a lot.

Just a nightmare.

A nightmare about the pain of getting there, like some awful metaphor for how Peter is still in pain, just not a physical one. Peter dreaming about that at the same time they're talking about getting him home doesn't feel like a coincidence.

The JL cases on his own screen suddenly feel like they're in the way. He closes them out and instead drags what Peter was looking at onto his screen, grabbing a pen. He opens the last, unused notebook and gets to work, using Peter's other two notebooks as a reference.

Peter wants to go home, so Dick's feelings on that don't matter. He'll help figure out a way to get him there that won't hurt him.

-

NOV 7th

The air is sticky with the scent of incoming rain.

They had checked the forecast before they headed out tonight, and the weatherman had reported "*Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. You never know.*" Peter would pay real money to be able to pick that guy's brain, because he'd never seen someone so dead inside, like his life's work meant nothing in the end.

But that's just how it goes, in Gotham. Jason had said that yeah, that means it's going to rain tonight, and no, they're still going out. Unless it gets really bad, and in which case, they'll have to head back to the Manor and try this again tomorrow.

Peter doesn't know about that, though. As it starts to sprinkle overhead, the vibrant neon lights of the Crime Alley district makes it look like a watercolor page. The red light from the restaurant next door is his favorite, because through the windows of this apartment building, the rain drops have shadows that really up the atmosphere. It makes them look ten times spookier when one crook turns on his light to see Red Hood and Spider-Man in their living room.

It's not much of a living room, though. When the other realizes what they're looking at, he screeches and grabs a lamp to throw at them, and it's one of the only things in the empty room. It's a shitty place to lie low and keep supplies, so they weren't focused on decorating it.

Peter watches the lamp make it, like, two feet before clattering to the ground.

It's a pitiful excuse for a distraction and a getaway. The second crook snatches his gun out of his belt with a curse, but before he can even think about pulling the trigger, Peter has his hand webbed to the wall and the gun is dropped to the (sadly, a little sticky) floor.

Jason was leaning against the wall right next to them, so Lamp-Thrower gets even less distance away than the lamp got before Jason has him by his collar and is throwing him on the ground.

“Sorry to drop by unannounced.” Peter steps on his arm to keep him from getting up, and kicks a shard of the broken lamp away from the guy’s face. “But this is kind of important. We’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

“Fuck you!” The criminal tries to get up, only to find that Peter is much stronger than he looks. His arm doesn’t budge at all. “What the hell? You some kind of freak?”

“I don’t think drug dealers get to call other people names.”

“What the hell do you two want?” He snarls up at Red Hood. Honestly, a little impressive that he has that in him, considering he’s pale and sweaty, eyes wide like he expects Red Hood to pounce any second and gut him.

“We got somethin’ to talk about.” Jason’s voice is low, covered by the voice modulator in his helmet. He crouches in front of the crook, elbows on his knees. The posture is a mock relax, and it’s all in an effort for the crook to see Hood’s guns within his reaching distance. “You tell us what we need to hear, and maybe we’ll be nice enough to continue on our way.”

Peter thinks it’s cool how fast he can switch like that. Just a few minutes ago, Jason was scolding him about his favorite pizza toppings. Right now, he actually looks like the crime lord that would make a guy want to go into witness protection.

The man swallows down his nerves, but he still is scared shitless. The other man that’s webbed to the wall is trying to pull his hand out of it, but is realizing that it’s a futile effort, and has pushed himself as far out of Hood’s sight as he can get.

“...Fine. I’m not stupid. What do wanna know?”

There’s a lot that they want to know, actually. But there’s only so much that this guy will be able to tell them.

Peter is getting to tag along on Jason’s Fear Gas case, and it’s a far cry from what Peter is *used* to doing. He’s not really a detective, like the Bats are, though he’s starting to think maybe he should be. He’s done his fair share of going around asking questions, but that was mostly as Parker, and he usually he gets dragged into the mess, rather than him having to find it.

This is *fun*. It’s different from patrol and different from getting pulled into shit, and to top it all off, he gets to hang out with Jason!

So far what they’ve gathered, before now, is that Fear Gas shipments are going missing. “Fear Gas” or “Fear Toxin” is a chemical substance that a guy named Jonathan Crane, or Scarecrow, made in order to induce an involuntary fear response in people. It can give people auditory and visual hallucinations, paranoia, anger. It’s real nasty shit that’s meant to drive people insane, and it needs an antidote in order to escape that fate. When Batman, Robin, and

Red Robin were staking out the Iceberg Lounge while looking for Ohnn, they overheard that shipments of Fear Gas are going missing, and they passed it off to Jason.

That's for a few reasons, but mostly it's because the people involved are set up in Crime Alley, which is Hood's territory.

It's not just one or two shipments that were taken, there's been five shipments of six crates. They get sent out using Crane's name, but he's still in Arkham (thank god, because that guy sounds awful), so they were able to rule him out. It's not uncommon for others to use Fear Gas or knockoffs for their own shit. A lot of scumbags use the toxin with a paralyzing agent as a means to kidnap people, especially around Crime Alley.

There are two groups involved: the Dubelz family and the Khadym Mob. Both of which have had problems in Crime Alley in the past, and *should* be listening to Hood like they promised they would.

Safe to say that Jason is not happy about this development.

Hood and Batman went looking through the Dubelz family's recent movements the night before last, when Peter was beating Damian at placing the Jumping Radars around Gotham. (He won, Damian is a liar.) The Dubelz have been starting shit with the Khadym Mob by going around in their territory to sell drugs. The Khadym Mob are drug smugglers, and Fear Toxin is often among their products to sell off to villains looking to concoct their latest scheme, and they were *not* pleased to hear that the Dubelz were starting shit, even *before* they started losing shipments.

The Khadym Mob were the ones who started the fight at the Lounge. They accused the Dubelz family of stealing the shipments and trying to sell their product- in their eyes, the Dubelz were leading up to this the whole time. Problem is, the Khadym Mob have no evidence that the Dubelz family is involved in the theft, just that they're overstepping territories. And that's because the products never make it to the warehouse.

They're always stolen on the water, and an empty boat will arrive. No Fear Gas, no crew. No bodies have turned up either. From what Peter can figure, that's because whoever is doing it is throwing their bodies overboard into the Gotham bay.

The Gotham bay is just as cursed as Gotham, and maybe ten times more nasty. Those bodies are probably dissolved by now.

What they want to know is Who, What, Where, When, and Why.

Who would steal Fear Gas, if not the Dubelz? What do they want with the Fear Gas, and why aren't they just buying it? But the guy that they're questioning at the moment only has the answer to two: Where, and When.

There's another shipment coming in tonight. The Khadym Mob played smart, though, by sending out five different possible locations for the shipment coming in, and spreading their people out over the city to make each location look real. There's only a handful of people that know which one is the real deal.

One of them is under Peter's foot.

"Where's the shipment coming in, Badr?"

"Ask me anything but that." Badr tries to scoot back, eyeing Jason's guns. "I can tell you all about those working girls that went missing last week- did you know there's a serial killer hanging out around there? I just found out yesterday."

"Already looking at that. Answer my questions or we're gonna stop playing nice."

"Come on, man, we don't want to get you in trouble." Peter attempts. Jason shakes his head, but Peter thinks the Good Cop Bad Cop Good Cop routine works for a good reason.

"I know, I know," Badr sighs like this wasn't an interrogation. His friend is trying to sink to his knees on the ground to reach a lamp shard. "You're doing your jobs. But I'm doing mine, too! Boss'll kill me if I let this get out. We can't afford to lose anymore product. The Dubelz schmucks aren't gonna get one over on us again."

"But we're asking so nicely. We won't tell anyone it was you." Peter has half of his attention on that, and is more focused on what the other guy is trying.

"I think it'll be fairly obvious that it was me."

The other manages to grab the lamp shard. He reaches up like it's a knife, and is absolutely shocked when instead of cutting through the webs, it just sticks to it. Interestingly, he tries to get another lamp sharp. It goes about the same way.

hello! friend! look it look it

Peter almost lets his foot up out of shock. The window to the apartment opens, Jason's gun out of it's holster in a split second and aimed right at Nightwing's head as he's halfway inside. Peter's about to web the gun away but he freezes with panic.

~~*Peter, I love you. It's not your fault. His hands were too small-*~~

Jason recognizes Nightwing when he puts his hands up in surrender, all smiles like he had no doubt Jason wouldn't shoot him.

"Is this how we're welcoming people to the party?" He closes the window and crosses the room. "Tried contacting you, but looks like you're busy."

"Yeah, we are busy, so why're you bothering us?" Jason grunts, standing up as well.

"Oracle figured out the warehouse, so these guys are pointless now."

"Aw man." Peter lets go of the guy's arm, but before he can get up, he webs him by his chest to lay on the floor. His first real interrogation and it gets cut short. Just his luck. Jason holsters his gun again. Badr sighs with relief, looking up at Spider-Man as the two adults talk.

"You're new."

“I am.” Peter commends his observation skills.

“Feels like Batman is running through sidekicks faster and faster nowadays.” Badr comments.

“I am *not* his sidekick.”

“Ok, whatever, sure looks like it. Fine, are you Hood’s sidekick?”

“I’m not a sidekick at all.”

Badr raises a disbelieving brow, giving him a once over. “Come off it, Spiderboy, they don’t let stupid teenagers as young as you run around without supervision.”

“That’s enough outta you.” Peter takes a glob of web and puts it over the drug dealer’s mouth. “And it’s Spider-*Man*. Get it right next time. And you know, choose a better life. I’m sure if you asked for help, we could get you outta this business, get you somewhere else entirely. You got a family? I’m seeing a beach house with your name on it, somewhere sunny and with no drugs at all.”

“Spidey, stop messing with him and let’s get going.” Hood calls out. Peter jumps to his feet, leaving Badr to grumble after him uselessly. Nightwing is already out on the fire escape and Hood is halfway out the window.

“So where are we going?” Peter asks, trailing after them. He had been asking Nightwing, but- He’s gone already. He’s pretty much down the street by the time Peter is out on the fire escape with Hood.

Jason is looking between them both (at least, until Nightwing is out of sight, and then he’s looking at just Peter.), and based on the *tense dislike? not happy* his spider-sense hisses at him, Jason has very much noticed the interaction.

“Cherry Hills, Dock 10. Wing and Double-R are going to check out the boat as it gets closer to the harbor. Follow me.”

He kicks off into the street with his own grappling hook, Peter not far behind. He thinks he remembers reading Cherry Hills on a bus stop map before, it’s on the other side of the island, but it’s not far from Crime Alley where they’re at right now.

Since there’s a silence on the comms and they’re swinging, Peter is left to his thoughts. Even as he does the math in his head to get the perfect swings, he fails to silence his mind or the insecurities that are threatening to swallow him whole.

...Dick has been doing that, ever since Peter ran out on their conversation the other night/morning. (Technically, it was morning, but the fact that no one else had woken up yet, even Alfred, meant that it was still nighttime.) And by that, he means doing exactly what Peter had been doing this whole time: running away when Peter is nearby, avoiding being in the same room if he can help it.

Except he's bad at it. Because Peter can tell that the only reason he enters rooms in the first place is to check on Peter, like he's making sure Peter hadn't disappeared, and then leaving when he sees that Peter is fine. So he's not actually avoiding Peter, he's trying to give him even more space than he already had been. And it eats away at Peter bit by bit, like his own actions had been doing before this.

Peter would be a massive hypocrite if he said that it hurt his feelings. He's been much less kind about the way he avoids Dick, like Dick has the plague or something.

But it's just that...

When Peter looks at Dick, he sees a stranger. And that is terrifying.

All his life, he had just guessed what could and couldn't be his parents' features on him. He had no idea what they might look like because their pictures were left in a storage unit that no longer exists. Ben and May always planned to put them back up when Peter would stop crying when he saw the photos, but it never got to happen.

Their faces were blurred, or just not in the picture, when he thought back on them.

And now, he looks at Dick and the guilt of not being able to recognize his own father's face hits him like a freight train.

When he was really, really little, the TV used to have static. This was before Stark Industries had moved on from weapon manufacturing to creating for the every day person. The TV had a basic remote and it was a huge box, and it had the VCR player that Peter liked so much. Peter liked being able to lift his hand to the screen and feel the static as it hummed under his palm. The light flickered in his eyes and the noise was comforting, like hearing a waterfall.

Right after seeing the Flying Graysons poster, Peter felt like static, and suddenly that feeling wasn't as comforting anymore.

From that moment until now, Peter has been switching between channels like someone else has the remote. One second he's all static and *nothing, nothing, nothing* and it feels like he's being buried under it. The next, he's getting a startling clarity to his surroundings, and everything feels *too much, too much, too much*. Because everyone is looking at him expectantly, like he should be screaming and crying or bursting with anger. They look at Peter like they can't figure out why he's *not* doing that.

And that's *too much* to process.

He doesn't know why he's not doing that either. When he's not feeling the nothing, Peter is feeling a *scary* amount of emotions that he's never had before. And each time he tries to talk to Dick or look at him, the static forms around the edges of his vision and he doesn't want to face the nothing.

It's childish, but he doesn't know how to snap out of it. He'd rather be feeling the emotions, trying to label them so he can have some type of clarity. But when he tries to actually *think* about it, Peter feels 'nothing.' It's infuriating, and that's why when Peter had caught Dick

sitting at the Batcomputer and had felt *relief* that he was there, the wind was knocked out of him.

It was the first time he'd felt something when looking at Dick for the past few days. It's why he got stupid and talked about that nightmare-

~~*All Peter could hold onto was ash and everything hurt hurt hurt like he'd be split apart and never come back again-*~~

-and allowed himself the comfort. And then he looked up and it hit him all over again, yanked back the progress he just made, and that's why he had to get out of there. Before Dick could see that his stupid kid from another dimension apparently doesn't grieve or remember him like a good kid is supposed to do.

Like *Dick* does.

Dick seems to feel everything about his parents and their deaths. That's why he got all freaked out about what Peter said at dinner. He's a good guy, a good brother, a good son, a good dad to Damian, but even he would feel ashamed of Peter if he knew. So Peter is trying not to let him know.

Peter is a rotten child. He didn't deserve Ben and May like he didn't deserve his parents, and he certainly didn't deserve Karen and her family, or Tony-

Peter almost slips while running a wall. He catches himself just before Jason can turn around to make sure he's keeping up, and it's like it never happened.

"Get a grip, Spider-Man." He scolds himself under his breath.

Cherry Hills smells like the harbor before they even get there. It's more of a residential area, if residential can be boiled down to houses for the people that work at the docks. But the farther that they go into it, the more and more warehouses and shipping containers they see. The buildings get smaller and smaller until they're left hopping over roofs instead of swinging. Peter spots Nightwing and Red Robin in a flash of well hidden color, but they're gone as soon as he sees them, headed towards the harbor.

watching

They land on top of a warehouse at Dock 10. There's a skylight that looks down at the area below, but the entire room is casted into dark. Peter feels eyes land on him, but they aren't from someone that he *knows*.

The dock is silent, save for the rain sprinkling down and the water washing below. A dingy boat knocks against the side of the wooden dock, over and over. *Knock. Knock. Knock.* The low buzz of his spider sense is warning him that the silence is-

wrong look it hear no

"Hood." Peter hisses, all the hair on his body standing up.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There’s only one heartbeat.” Peter warns him.

“What do mean, only one? That can’t be right, each of the warehouses have multiple people guarding them.” Jason runs a hand along the side of his helmet. He looks down inside the building, stalking the ledge of the side of the skylight, tense and ready to run or fight.

“Damnit. There’s bodies inside. We might be too late.”

watching wrong bad get it out get it AWAY get it out

Peter is crouched low, tense and ready to run as he tries to find the eyes on him. Someone is trying to *stalk* them, he can feel it, can hear a single heartbeat around. His spider sense *hates* them, is pissed that they’re around. It’s not a danger warning, it’s almost like his spider-sense wants them gone, wants to chase them away, that they shouldn’t be around him.

But he doesn’t *see* anyone. Even in the low light and the rain making visibility harder, there should be a movement, a sign that they’re nearby. He tries to pinpoint their heartbeat, and all he comes up with is that they’re moving around, watching *him*, because they see *him*.

“Hey, shitheads, we got bodies.” Jason is telling them on the comms. “The warehouse is full of them. Had to use thermal imaging, there’s no light inside.”

“They were alive minutes ago,” Babs cusses under her breath. *“They literally just sent out a call to their boss that I intercepted. Whoever killed them is-”*

“Still here.” Peter whispers. Jason catches it.

“You said you only hear one?”

“I don’t like them.” Peter stands up, feeling vaguely pissed off by their presence. The spider-sense agrees with him, that whoever is watching him is *bad ugly get it away chase it get it out*.

“That’s not what I asked, oddly enough.” Jason stands up as well.

“Spidey, you alright? What’s going on over there?” Dick’s voice joins them on the comms. *“The boat is headed your way. There’s people on board. Looks like whoever is responsible isn’t on the boat.”*

“That’s cause they’re over here.” Peter says. He’s interrupted by the long, horrid screeching of metal.

It reverberates through the warehouse, echoing back at itself like a chorus of screams. Metal on metal, a teeth grinding noise like a fork scraping a plate, nails on a chalkboard- whatever hell that it’s called, it’s awful enough that Jason and Peter both rear back to get away from it. The warehouse shakes underneath them as whoever is making the noise drags it across the wall. When it stops, there’s a second where the echoes die out, casting them back into the quiet of the bay and the knocking of the dingy boat.

GET BACK!!!!!!!

A huge metal rod breaks through the skylight glass.

The glass and metal fly into the air like a geyser, and it all comes crashing back down on top of them. Peter rolls to get away from it, grabbing Jason on the way by this jacket. The metal rod clangs sharply as it hits the ground below them.

“Hood, Spider, come in! What was that?”

“We got company!” Jason bites back, gun in hand.

“You got a name yet?”

“No, fuck off, it literally just happened. Keep an eye on the boat, we got this.”

Peter knocks open the other half of the skylight with a swift kick. The glass pane breaks way and mixes in with the rain on the warehouse floor. Peter jumps down first, avoiding one of the bodies and their blood on the ground.

get it out get it away get away get away

“What an unpleasant greeting,” Peter calls out to the dark. Jason hooks his grappling hook and meets Peter down on the floor.

There’s about twenty men down. Some of their skulls are cracked open, others are pointed like they had ended up shooting each other in the enclosed space. Peter gets to the middle of the warehouse when he spots the silver thread of spider silk on one of the corpses, who had been reaching for a phone.

On his hand, there’s a sticky note.

A GIFT FOR SPIDER-MAN :)

-BLACK SPIDER

“You like it?” A new voice calls out from the banisters. “I just *had* to have something to give you when I figured out we’d be meeting, finally.”

get it away get it away kill it crush it kill it-

Peter’s never had his spider-sense so volatile before. Every nerve in his body is telling him to chase the threat away, to make sure it doesn’t come back. Peter’s gut churns with sick, backing away from the sticky note and the corpse.

wrong it’s wrong it’s bad get it away

“Who the hell are you?”

“Can’t you read, Spidey? My name’s on the sticky note. Cool idea, by the way. Hope you don’t mind that I used it. Thought I’d have a little fun while I was back in Gotham. I missed this place, while I was training. It’s good to be home, as rotten as it is.”

“Spider-Man, where’s that heartbeat coming from?” Hood stands behind him, his back facing Peter’s. “Keep your head straight, don’t let him get under your skin.”

“But *imagine* my surprise-”

“He’s in the banisters.”

“-when I get back, and I find that *someone* has my whole persona, and is apparently on Batman’s side. Not to mention, he’s barely a *teenager*. ”

“Why don’t you come down here and we can talk about whatever grievances you seem to have?” Peter tries to push down the instinct that has his fingers twitching. *get it away get it out-*

“Oh, no, I’m good. I have the whole scary monologue down to a science.” Black Spider replies. His voice carries over, making it harder to tell where he is, but Peter thinks he can see the outline of a man standing above him.

The rain patters down on the roof. Lightning flashes overhead, giving Peter a glimpse of the man- the other spider- that his instincts tell him to destroy.

Black Spider is a grown man around Jason’s height, though slimmer. He wears a purple and black suit, a spider web design on his neck and shoulders. He has red, Almost-Spider-Man eyes looking down at him, and a spider-symbol on his forehead. He’s studying Spider-Man just as intently, like maybe he hears the hiss of his own spider-sense telling him to kill Peter.

Only, this man is capable and willing to kill. Peter is not.

“See, I hide in the shadows to look down at you, like the little arachnid that you are, showing you exactly what I’m capable of with all the bodies littered around. I open up with telling you that Gotham is where I come from, and that I’m back...”

A distant explosion sounds off. It’s not that far away, since the air pushes past and rattles the warehouse. The sound mixes in with the thunder, the rain growing thicker, the wind beginning to howl and whip around. The storm is rolling in over Gotham.

“Then I tell you that my coworkers have your buddies preoccupied.” Black Spider has a breathy laugh. “And this is the part where I warn you, kid, that if you don’t leave right now, I’m gonna cave your skull in.”

AHHHH and there's that!! Please read this A/N because I have an announcement :)

1) I'm so sorry about the cliffhanger. I actually planned to conclude Peter and Dick's troubles (at least, THIS trouble) in this chapter, but the more I wrote the more I realized that this chapter needed to be cut in half. So that's adding another chapter to LoF... again. That's a reason that I don't have a set chapter count for y'all. I DO have all of the chapters planned, but things happen, such as this, and things like number 2 on this list:

2) i've been waiting to include Maps for a while!! For anyone unaware, Maps, AKA Mia Mizoguchi, is the sixth Robin, canon to DC. I highly encourage looking her up or reading her comics, she's a sweetheart and I adore her. She IS younger than Peter and Dami, but only by 2 years, and that's on purpose because canon is my bitch, as we know. And Black Spider!! I knew I had to include him at some point. If you've watched Young Justice, you'll see he's there. Eric Needham is also an interesting character, and he kind of reminds me of Jason in a way. He is also not immune to him basically becoming MY character because canon doesn't exist here.

3) Announcement time... If you follow me on TikTok, you might have seen my most recent posts include another AU for a Peter in Gotham fic. alighterwood and I have 6 AU ideas, and I PLAN to write them all at this point in time. But again, life gets in the way, so I don't want to PROMISE that I'll write all 6. However, what I can say is that LoF itself is going to be a series.

Yes!! LoF is going to have 3 fics in total. There's:

-LoF(CMIYC),

-In This Continuum

-The Only Way (That I Can Be)

If I end up writing the other aus as well, that would be 8 fics in total. You can see why I'd be focused on LoF series atm. Thanks to everyone for reading and I can't wait to see you next chapter (or, on tiktok)!! Love you!!!

End Notes

aaand there's chapter one :)) this is gonna be a LOOOONG one, folks. I do not have a set update schedule, please forgive me. but do know that I have up until chapter 6 written, but I'm doing a lot of work on chapter 3 right now. again, don't be afraid to comment.

(ao3 nuked me on the tags ((they're scared of my huge enormous brain, not that i'm bragging or anything)), so i literally can not tag anything else. so please note that there are additional tags that I couldn't put, like characters that show up later, and that the broad "batfamily & peter parker" tag means ALL of them. everyone gets peter time.)

Also- Ry's LOVELY playlist for this fic:

[leap of faith \(catch me, if you can\)](#)

Works inspired by this one

[Sleep deprived ramblings of your local idiot](#) by [Cygnusposts](#)

[The Amazing Spider-Man in Gotham](#) by [Spidey_yipyip62](#)

[Cursed to See \(But Not to Hear\)](#) by [whsky](#)

[Spiders in the sky!? I had a dream about that once...](#) by [Flowersofbuffoonery](#)

[If You Can Dodge Traffic, You Can Dodge A Ball](#) by [3SpicyGeeseInATrenchCoat](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!